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2
The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

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Crown Prince of Natra
Wein Salema Arbalest
"I SERIOUSLY WANNA TURN HER DOOOOOWN!?"
"....."
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"Do you want to steal the Empire with me?"
Youngest Imperial Princess of the Earthworld Empire
Lowellmina Earthworld

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"Wein, behind you."
Ninym
Along with the other two boys, Wein turned toward the door to the classroom and spotted a young girl.
Glen
Strang
Lowa
Wein

"...It's as splendid as the first time."
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CONTENTS

The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)

Chapter 1
Hey, How About a Political Marriage?

Chapter 2
A Visit from the Imperial Princess

Chapter 3
A Fated Meeting, A Predestined Reunion

Chapter 4
Circling Schemes

Chapter 5
A Clash of Opinion

Chapter 6
Double Ingenuity

Epilogue

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2

Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro

YEN ON
New York

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The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?) 2
Toru Toba

Translation by Jessica Lange
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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1: Hey, How About a Political Marriage?

Chapter 2: A Visit from the Imperial Princess

Chapter 3: A Fated Meeting, A Predestined Reunion

Chapter 4: Circling Schemes

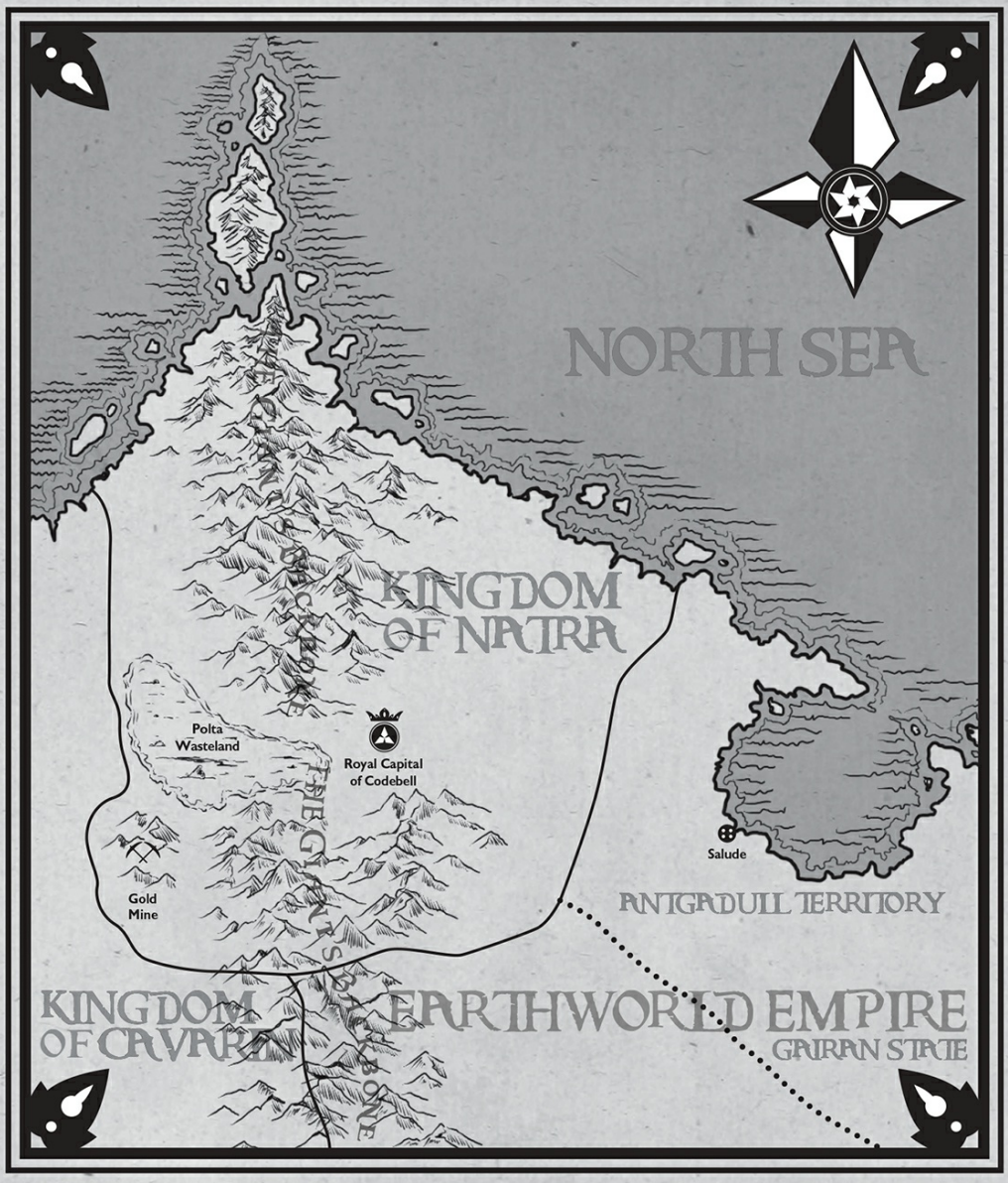
Chapter 5: A Clash of Opinion

Chapter 6: Double Ingenuity

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter


NORTH SEA
KINGDOM OF NATRA
Polta Wasteland
Royal Capital of Codebell
Salude
ANTGADULL TERRITORY
Gold Mine
KINGDOM OF CAVARA
EARTHWORLD EMPIRE
GAIRAN STATE

Chapter 1 | Hey, How About a Political Marriage?

The continent of Varno was split right down the middle by a mountain range called the Giant's Backbone. The lands to its East and West were home to a crowded mess of countries big and small. Among them was a tiny nation that carved out a place for itself in a valley near the northernmost tip of the mountains.

It was known as the Kingdom of Natra.

◆◇◆

The citizens of Natra became dispirited when the first signs of autumn began to creep up on their kingdom.

The wind gave them a gentle warning that the brief summer was over and that a long winter season was about to take its place. When the chilly breeze passed by them, it was customary for the townspeople to shiver and click their tongues in annoyance as they started preparing for the cold days ahead.

But this year was different.

The rays of the summer sun were waning. Autumn was just around the corner. And despite that, the people were filled with a cheerful vitality. In fact, the nation thrummed with heated enthusiasm.

The reason for their jubilation was the invasion by the neighboring nation of Marden and the subsequent war that had erupted right before the summer.

With the current king bedridden, command had fallen to Crown Prince Wein Salema Arbalest, who led the troops into battle, pushing back their enemy. But he didn't stop there. He went on to invade Marden in turn and even captured their precious gold mine.

And when Marden raised an army of thirty thousand to retake it, Wein had managed to stand his ground with only a few thousand men of his own. This historic achievement was more than enough fuel for the people to heap praise on their crown prince. As the military fervor refused to die down in the Kingdom of Natra, the townspeople forgot all about the oncoming chill.

The same could be said about the royal capital of Codebell.

"Just as you'd expect from His Highness."

"When I heard the king had fallen ill, I wondered what was going to happen to us for a while, but…"

"The prince is merciful and mighty. Our nation is safe as long as he's here."

This kind of discussion could be heard all over. There was no need to strain to pick it out from the crowd. The recent war had left a strong impression on the people.

I imagine they'll continue to be on cloud nine for a while… thought a young girl, as she slipped through the main street with a burlap sack.

With her near-translucent white hair and flaming red eyes, she had the appearance of a doll. But she was a flesh-and-blood human, Ninym Ralei, the one who served as aide to the subject of many a rumor—Prince Wein.

And so what if we won against a neighboring nation? It was just this once. It doesn't mean that we're suddenly stronger as a nation or that other countries don't pose a threat to us anymore.

It'd be inaccurate to call her pessimistic. After all, she found the victory favorable, and she was pleased that her master had earned the respect of his subjects as a result. But as someone engaged in national politics, Ninym concerned herself more with future danger than past accomplishments.

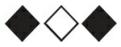
It worries me that Wein's reputation is skewed to one side.

Through the grapevine, the general populace knew many sides of Wein, but all agreed that he was a benevolent ruler. Everyone had heard about how he remembered every last one of his soldiers' names and rooted for them as individuals. Or how he personally liberated the residents of the captured mine from oppressive rule. There were truths and lies, but overall, Wein was seen as kind and compassionate in the eyes of the public.

This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Certainly not, but Ninym was well aware that a skewed reputation could cause issues down the line.

I wonder how Wein feels about that. She decided to ask him about it later.

With her mind made up, Ninym hastened toward the palace, where she imagined the crown prince would be waiting for her arrival.



Constructed by King Salema, the very first ruler of the Kingdom of Natra, Willeron Palace was a structure with a long, rich history.

That said, it was just shy of two hundred years old. With repeated repairs, the kingdom had managed to keep it in a functional state and restore its exterior, but the palace was overdue to be demolished and rebuilt… At least, the idea had been brought up in meetings for a few dozen years running.

But there were no signs it would be happening anytime soon. It wasn't out of respect for the palace's history or the sentimental attachment of its occupants. It came down to the cold hard math: There was no wiggle room in the budget to accommodate this project.

Down that dilapidated, "historic" hallway, a young boy sauntered forward, trailed by a gaggle of government officials. His name was Wein Salema Arbalest. Carrying the legacy of the kingdom's birth in his middle name, he was rumored to be the founding king reborn.

"Your Highness, the channel along the Torito River has been completed without incident."

"How are the water levels of the main river and its tributaries?"

"It's estimated that both fit in the range of our expectations. We've calculated that the possibility of a flood has dropped significantly. All according to plan."

"Don't get too optimistic. Start to believe you control creation, and it'll come back to bite you. Keep a close eye on it."

"Yes, of course."

When one official bowed his head and took a step back, another filled his place.

"About the Torito River. We've had reports of disputes with local tribes as our people travel down the tributaries."

"That should have been left to the dispatched magistrates. Are you telling me they couldn't strike a deal with the local communities?"

"I regret to inform you that words and appeals to authority have failed to sway them."

“I guess there’s no helping it. Tell Raklum to head down there with his troops and shush them. Do whatever it takes to avoid bloodshed. Gather as much information on the area as you can, and submit a detailed report.”

“Understood!”

Wein’s orders were swift and precise, exacting political measures with elegance and magnanimity. The officials with tender hearts considered him an ideal prince and one worth serving.

“Your Highness, we have a report from General Hagal, who is defending our borders from the Kingdom of Cavarin. He wishes to receive your approval on a few things.”

“I’ll take a look before I send a reply. Are Cavarin and the remnants of the Marden army still engaged in a skirmish?”

“Yes. The remaining soldiers are united under the banner of the surviving members of the royal family.”

“We don’t know how the situation’s going to play out. Form diplomatic relations with both camps. Don’t forget to tighten surveillance and send more spies.”

“Understood. We’ll take care of it immediately.”

Wein continued with his vassals until his office door came into view and he’d reached his destination.

“Your Highness, I apologize for the delay. I have the financial report for the war and the budget for each of the restructured departments. Here.”

Wein took the report and stared at it for a beat. “You’re sure this is correct?”

“Absolutely.”

“…I see. I’ll be looking over it in my office. Come in if you need anything,” he announced.

The officials halted in place and bowed once as Wein entered the office.

“…Phew.”

When he was finally alone, he placed the report on his desk, stretched out his limbs, and drew in a long breath.

“I JUST WANNA SELL THIS COUNTRY OFF AND GET THE HELL OUTTA HEEEEEERE!” Wein wailed. “Oh boy. The treasury is running on empty… What in the world? …Like, yeah, so maybe we went overboard with the war against Marden, but I didn’t think it’d be *this* bad…”

He stared at the report on the desk with trepidation. The merciless figures

written there would make any politician shudder.

Wein had a new idea. "…Hold on. Calm down. I could have misread the whole thing. Yeah, that's gotta be it. If I check the report again, I bet the coffers will turn out to be bigger by at least two or three figures…!"

Wein gingerly placed his hands on the documents that he'd dropped, keeping them as far away from him as his outstretched arms would allow. He peeled up a corner and snuck a quick peek.

There was no mistaking it this time.

Wein face-planted onto the desk as Ninym slipped in through the doors with her burlap sack.

"…Don't tell me you're just fooling around, Wein," she lamented in a voice coated in exasperation when she spotted him.

What she didn't expect was for him to reply with a bold laugh. "Heh-heh-heh, I wonder if you can keep your cool after seeing *this*…!"

"This is… Oh, it's the cost of our war." Ninym thumbed through the pages. "…Seems about right. Just as we'd estimated. It's as awful to see the first time as the last."

They hadn't gone into the war lightly, but war is an expensive endeavor. And since Natra wasn't wealthy to begin with, it took a huge bite of their budget. They may have annexed a sliver of Marden territory and seized their mine, but it'd take years before they got their money's worth.

"Well then, I'm guessing these new departmental budgets are based on this report… Hey, Ninym, so you know about the money we have to cover expenses of the royal family?"

"Yes, the budget for private use."

In other words, an allowance for royalty that far surpassed what an average commoner could hope to ever see. They *were* the representatives of the entire nation, after all.

Well, in theory.

"This is my current allowance."

Wein fished out a small cloth sack from his breast pocket and flipped it inside out. A single gold coin bounced off the table.

"…That's it?"

"That's it," Wein moaned. "Argh! To think I protected us against Marden, swiped their mine, all while keeping the war budget at a minimum! And my reward? One measly gold coin? What a serious downer…" He deflated,

slumping against the desk.

Ninym checked the reports as she kept him in her periphery. “Couldn’t you have cut some other spending? Like, the military.”

“They already can’t make ends meet. We gotta compensate for lost manpower and equipment, and if I cut it down any more, the troops will plan a coup and kill me.”

“Then raise taxes. Simple.”

“The people will revolt and kill me.”

Ninym gave him a spirited nod. “Then let’s give up.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!” Wein writhed around in agony—the sight of which pulled on her heart strings.

She suddenly had an idea appear in the back of her mind. “…I know! Wein, why don’t you think of it from another perspective?”

“Like what?”

“Think of it this way: You went to war at the head of a destitute country and came back with enough to afford yourself one gold coin.”

“……” Wein folded his arms. “You’ve got a point.”

“Right? If it were anyone else, we would have been in the red, for sure,” Ninym sincerely assured him.

No one else could have led them into battle and pulled off the same feat.

As if in higher spirits, Wein started to slowly puff out his chest and heaved an exaggerated sigh. Ninym could feel his ego inflating, just a little bit.

“Well, you’re right. Like, there’s no one in this country with more power, popularity, and wisdom than me. This is the only logical outcome when I show even a fraction of my potential. Now, isn’t that right?”

With an overconfident swagger, Wein started to toy with the coin. He was being a bit of an ass, but it was more annoying to deal with him when he was morose.

Ninym pressed on. “Exactly, Wein. You could say that coin is proof of your skills.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It carries the weight of a nation that no one else can hold!”

“You’re right!”

“It may be a single coin to others, but it’s priceless!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Miss Ninym. You’re giving me too much credit! I

may get overly confident, you know?!"

"But I'm just telling the truth."

"And who am I to stop you? Man, it's so hard being right all the time! It's so *freakin'* hard being a genius!"

Ninym smiled. "That aside, now you can pay me back the money I lent you when you were an exchange student."

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!" Wein yowled as the coin was snatched from his fingers. "Are you a demon?!"

"I have every right to it."

"Hello? There's a little thing called 'timing'!"

"You want me to add interest?"

"It's all yours, Lady Ninym…! Oh, please let me massage your shoulders…!"

Wein bid a heartbroken farewell to his gold coin, but mitigating accrued interest came before his pride.

"I'll give you this in exchange. Enjoy." She opened the bag and took out some food wrapped in paper. "It's rabbit pie from The Polar Bear."

"Woah, this takes me way back. I had no idea they were still open."

The Polar Bear was a restaurant tucked away in a corner of the city surrounding the castle. Wein and Ninym used to sneak off into town as kids.

"Aw yeah! This thick slab of pie crust, the overpowering taste of herbs, the dryness of the rabbit meat… Mmm, just like the old days."

"You can be honest and say it tastes bad."

"We all become poets when we reminisce." Wein slowly turned to gaze out the window as he chewed on it. "You know, I haven't been able to survey the town lately."

"Which makes sense. Time is of the essence when you're acting on behalf of the king, and for your safety you have to behave in accordance with your new position."

"Meaning there's no way you and I could run off on our own like old times."

"I suppose we could. If you feel like getting assassinated."

"Never mind, I'm good."

The Kingdom of Natra considered Wein the man of the hour, but there were more than a few who considered this development a nuisance. That included vassals who were giving Wein the cold shoulder, aristocrats who'd

been hoping for a gullible and foolish king rather than a sagacious one, and a number of nations begrudging Natra's rapid development.

Of course, there were more people grateful for Wein's existence, but some lurked in the shadows for a chance to wring his neck.

"How were things in town?"

"I'm guessing this celebratory mood is going to continue. We don't get good news often. I can't say I blame the people, but I'm concerned that your name is becoming synonymous with compassion and benevolence."

Wein's expression turned grim as if to say, *Ah, right.*

"It's fine to be popular with the masses, but it'll be a problem if they don't take me seriously."

That was exactly what worried Ninym. No politician is ever displeased by the people's favor. Popularity means support. A higher rate of approval means it's easier to move a nation to meet proposed goals.

But even if a ruler is loved by the people, that isn't the same as immunity from being looked down upon. Earning the disrespect of the masses even once could lead the populace to start flouting laws and political authority, indulging in crime as the country falls to pieces.

To prevent that, politicians have to strike a delicate balance: to be loved and feared by the people.

Well, easier said than done. Too many nations had fallen for failing to maintain this equilibrium.

"It'll be fine if I can rule without earning their disdain. But if they get full of themselves…"

"You'll do what?"

"…I'll become a dictator!"

"Um, hold on."

"Dictatorship! Tyranny! Despotism! Totalitarianism… Oh, how the corpses will pile up! We can achieve peace by sending the masses into a perpetual state of grief and resentment!"

"If that happened, they'll squash you—literally. That's not the sort of joke someone in politics should make, Wein."

"Yesh, ma'am."

Just because Wein had one accomplishment under his belt, it didn't mean his position was secure. They needed to avoid anything that would throw cold water on his hard-won favor.

“Well, let’s wait and see how things go. Keep an eye out and ears open for the word on the street.”

“I’ll see to it.”

“Great. With that settled, I’m off to have some fun!”

“Wait.”

Ninym yanked the collar of Wein’s shirt as he attempted to clamber out of his chair.

“Are you dreaming? There’s still work to be done.”

“…Heh, I thought you’d say that. But think about it for a second, Ninym. It’s weird for me to be this busy.”

She flashed him a look. *What the hell are you on?*

He continued. “First of all, in my opinion, a nation is made up of a hundred vassal specialists and one monarch generalist.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Within the nation are a variety of industries, like farming, animal husbandry, construction, transportation, and the military. But none require the leadership or input of the monarch to function. It’s enough to have vassals specializing in those fields.”

“I see. Go on.”

“It’s the job of a monarch to decide on industry policies and oversee them. We determine what to research, allocate necessary funds according to set budgets, keep a lookout for corruption, and check if industries are progressing according to plan. To do that, we need to know our countries inside and out. But the ultimate goal is to be vigilant for corruption and errors, not meddle with the industries themselves.”

“There’s some truth to that.”

“Right? It’d be weird for me to bother with progress and research! My only job should be to check the reports from each department and dole out the cash money! And I already did that today! In other words, I’m free! How’s that for a flawless argument?!”

“Are you done dreaming?”

“NIIIIIIIIIIINYM!” Wein cried. “What the hell? How could you possibly take issue with my reasoning?!”

“First, a question: How many of those ‘specialists’ are in Natra?”

“……” He slyly averted her gaze.

Ninym sandwiched that face between her hands and forced him to look at

her head-on.

"There's, uh…enough to count on one hand… At least, I hope…"

"In that case, you'll have to find others to fill in the gaps, Mr. Generalist."

"Yeah…but—"

"And you intentionally failed to mention diplomatic relations. That's a part of your princely duties. It isn't uncommon to lose a seat at the negotiating table if you can't stand shoulder to shoulder with the bigwigs."

"Yeah… There's that, too."

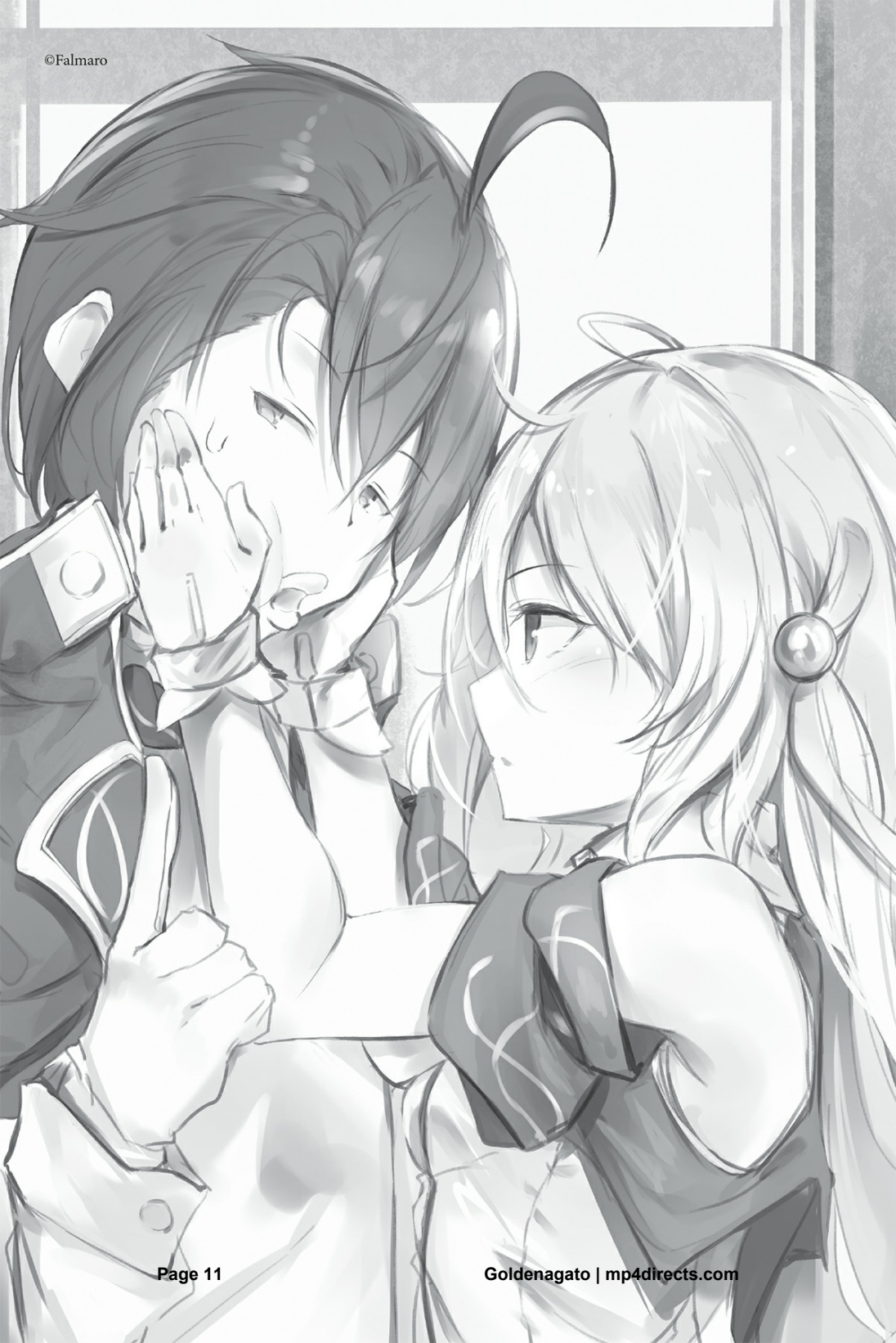
"Plus, you're scheduled to talk with the newly appointed Imperial ambassador of Earthworld after this. And I think you know who's the only person who can claim to be on equal footing."

"Fine, I get it! Message received! I'll do it. Are you happy now?!" Wein ranted despairingly. "Agh, why'd the big-booby lady have to go home, anyway?!"

"Because you beat her down."

"Damn it, that's right!"

The Earthworld Empire was positioned in the eastern half of the divided continent of Varno and was a major power that had been aggressively expanding its territory in recent years. That was until its figurehead—the Emperor—fell ill some months prior, and now the nation was experiencing a major upheaval.



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Until a short while ago, a woman named Fyshe Blundell had been stationed in Natra as the Imperial ambassador of the Empire, but she returned home after losing her duty and position in a game of diplomacy against Wein. A replacement had finally just been dispatched, and this day would mark their first official meeting.

"About this new ambassador…"

"Ambassador Teord Talum. A middle-aged man."

"Boring."

"In terms of career, he's primarily accompanied the ambassador to a host of nations abroad. Thanks to that, he has a vast network of connections in foreign states and provinces but not in his homeland."

"And any pretty lady friends?"

"None whatsoever."

"Booooring."

"This is his first time serving as ambassador, but apparently he's been complaining that he's too old for this and wishes to return to the Empire… Wein, pay attention."

"Yeah, I'm listening." Wein waved his hand lazily. "*Sigh.* When will I ever be able to retire?"

His assignments ruthlessly continued to pile up with no end in sight.

◆◇◆

"The Jilaat mine is one of the top gold deposits on the entire continent, but its yields have been primarily circulated only in the West until now. I'm certain you're aware of this, Your Highness."

Teord dove right in at the start of the meeting.

"To think that an ally is currently in possession of the mine. It can be nothing but an act of divine aid. The demand for gold is extremely high in our Empire. I strongly urge that you sell us your supply," he continued forcefully.

It was as if his speech was the embodiment of enthusiasm and fervor.

And that observation was correct. For Teord Talum, the Imperial ambassador currently stationed in Natra, this meeting with the crown prince was of utmost importance. He had served as a foreign diplomat for the Empire for over fifteen years and, to be frank, an unremarkable one at that.

After all, he'd been born a commoner, and even Teord himself couldn't exactly claim that he was particularly competent. That's why he'd filled in at short-staffed national embassies, performing routine duties and accompanying the regional ambassador on this or that trip. And when Teord was done with his tasks, he'd be switched over to another embassy and repeat the process all over again.

All the while, there were scores of people both younger and smarter than him who'd been promoted through the ranks in the Empire, which prided itself on its meritocracy. Teord had felt ashamed about it more than once or twice.

But an unexpected chance had befallen him. After his predecessor lost her position, he had been selected to fill in for Ambassador Fyshe Blundell.

Of course, the biggest reason for his deployment was that the Empire could hardly afford to lose its most competent workers to positions overseas, considering the instability of their current state of affairs. His superiors had ordered him not to say anything more than was strictly necessary.

—But I can't just follow their instructions this time!

Once the storm of internal conflict passed through the Empire, Teord was destined to be dismissed from his duties, and another would take his place. If he couldn't leave behind his mark, he'd be plopped right back into his fixed position as a stand-in.

Teord was already in his forties, and he was reaching the age when it was starting to get more difficult to travel the world constantly. Plus, he had a family back in his home country. He was lucky if he could see them once a year.

I've gotta show them what I can do and secure a position based back in the homeland. For my family…!

Teord had been spurred on by his personal circumstances as he proceeded to the royal palace in the Kingdom of Natra to meet Wein. There's nothing wrong with being motivated, whatever the reason for it.

The problem, however, was that his work was in realm of international diplomacy.

Now, now. Don't get yourself all riled up.

Wein could read his opponent's thoughts all too well—not that it required much effort on his part, since it was obvious from Teord's eyes boring into his jugular.

You're asking for it if you're gonna show your hand that quickly.

International diplomacy was about haggling for the profit of one's country. And considering how the effects of a success or failure could ripple across thousands—or tens of thousands of people—even the most inconsequential information had to be handled with the utmost care.

But Teord had already revealed his demands. Which meant the other party could dig into the circumstances and background that steered these requests, as well as the future actions to follow. Basically, it gave Wein more than enough information to strategize.

And the Empire didn't need to make any demands about affairs concerning the mine if they took the situation in Natra into account. Natra had weak relations with the West, and they shared their eastern border with the Empire. As long as the Empire didn't lowball them, Natra would have eventually approached them about making a deal as a matter of course.

But he wants me to hurry up and seal the deal. I've heard rumors that he wants to return to his country. Seems he needs to make his mark. And fast, Wein calmly analyzed.

"I appreciate your proposal, Ambassador. Gold may captivate us with its glitter and glitz, but it isn't enough to illuminate our dark winters or offer us respite. I'd much rather turn it into something that can help my people directly."

"In that case—"

"However."

Teord looked as if he was ready to bite, but Wein stopped him.

"I think you've heard about our difficult battle against Marden. In terms of damages, we suffered more than casualties. The truth is, since the Jilaat mine was our primary battlefield, it has lost most of its functionality."

This wasn't a lie. They really had collapsed a number of tunnels in order to win. The transportation roads and miners' houses had also been destroyed, and restoration was still ongoing.

"Thanks to that, the mining conditions are less than ideal, and all operations have come to a halt… It's hard to say how much we'll excavate once everything is up and running. Which means it's hard for me to make a deal right now."

"N-nghhh…"

Okay, this may have contained a white lie. They *had* restarted mining

operations alongside the repairs. And they'd already estimated the expected output and income of the mine, which meant Wein had more than enough information to hammer out the initial outline of a deal, even if he couldn't close it right away.

If that were the case, why did he lie? Well, Wein knew that securing this deal would be considered a huge win for the ambassador. It was important to hold out for someone with the potential to establish a favorable, long-term connection with Natra instead.

An appointed ambassador acted as a direct channel to other nations. Plus, there was no guarantee that there would ever be as great an opportunity to strengthen their bond with the Empire in the future. That made Wein hesitant to agree to a deal with a worthless ambassador who could be let go at a moment's notice.

If Ambassador Blundell were here, I would have talked about handing it over—with some bonuses in exchange for us, of course—but I'm not so sure about this guy.

Teord would have exploded into a fit of rage if he could have heard Wein's thoughts. But at the negotiating table, the substantial years Teord had on Wein wouldn't level the playing field. It all came down to talent.

"Well then, Your Highness. When will you have a better idea about when you'll resume operations at the mine?"

"Hard to say. It's a critical asset to our nation, and we're planning to construct a flawless system, which takes time."

"But that's…"

"Hey, no need to worry. I know it's important for us to maintain ties. Once the mine is up and running, I plan on bringing up our deal again right away."

Wein dodged Teord's attempt to hound him and offered a small smile.

The meeting continued to proceed with the ambassador trying to find an "in" and Wein remaining evasive while promising nothing. At last, Teord slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

...He doesn't seem to have much else to offer. I'll just let this conversation die out.

The last hand marked an end to the game. There was nothing left here for either of them even if the conversation dragged on.

"Could it be you're not feeling well? I know it's earlier than planned, but

we can wrap up…?”

“N-no, I’m perfectly fine!” Teord adjusted his posture, realizing his despondency was showing. “It’s just that…I’m impressed by your insight, especially considering your young age.”

Wein chuckled. “I’m embarrassed to hear that coming from a talented official of the Empire. I’m still learning the ropes, but I do try and put on a bold front.”

“‘Learning the ropes,’ huh… I’ve encountered any number of royals throughout my career, but I sense a clarity in you that’s no less than the ruler of any other nation.”

“Isn’t that an awful lot of praise to be laying on an unmarried youngster, Ambassador Talum?” Wein responded casually, flashing him a wry smile.

Teord’s eyes suddenly widened. “Come to think of it, are you betrothed, Your Highness…?”

“Hmm? Ah, well… The vassals are apparently searching for candidates, but I don’t have a ring set aside for anyone yet.” Wein’s shoulders shrugged. “If I became smitten with a commoner, I’d go down in history, but when I close my eyes, all I see are mountains of paperwork.”

“…I see.” Teord nodded and flashed a sliver of a smile, his face marked with deliberation. “Marriage is a fine thing, Your Highness. It makes life all the richer.”

“But they say there can be no fortune without misfortune, don’t they?”

“A spouse will stick with you, even in those hard times.”

“…I see. When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound bad at all.”

Wein and Teord talked for a while longer until it was time for their first meeting to draw to a close. No new ties had been formed between the two nations. It was nothing more than the young crown prince and the new ambassador introducing themselves to each other. Based on the outcome, that was all anyone would assume had happened.

But something unexpected had transpired. Despite the undesirable outcome, Teord’s face was not marred by disappointment but instead lit up by a shining beacon of hope.

...The gold mine may not have worked out, but there’s potential here.

As he formulated a plan in his mind, the ambassador briskly exited the palace.

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Wein stared out the window as he watched Teord leave.

Ninym piped up beside him. "…And? Is it okay to just leave that be?"

"Huh?"

"Ambassador Talum. Didn't you notice?" Ninym spoke with slight distaste. "He…plans on finding a bride for you in the Empire."

"Seems that way."

That was Teord's last-minute plan. From the perspective of an outsider, Wein was a young, mild-mannered crown prince overflowing with wisdom—and most importantly, he was single. For the girls and women of the world, he was a rare find. If Teord introduced him to the woman who would become his princess, the ambassador would stand tall in the eyes of his superiors.

"It may have been a last-ditch effort, but that was pretty gutsy." Wein gave a wry smile.

There were none more terrifying than Wein and Ninym. The duo had not only seen through Teord's plans but already took his next moves into account as well.

"Well, it won't exactly be easy for him to pull off. Right, Ninym?"

"…Yes. If he's going to introduce a girl to foreign royalty, commoners are out of the question. The daughter of a baron or viscount wouldn't be proper, either. He'd want a daughter of an earl at the very least, but I don't think the ambassador has any appropriate connections for that."

"Plus, even though the Empire's laws allow left-hand marriages, the nobility would need the approval of the Emperor to join a royal family in another country. With their country's throne empty, there's not much they can do."

It wasn't rare for marriages among noble families to come laden with restrictions, especially when it came to unions with influential foreigners. These had the potential to throw off the internal power balance or invite other nations to meddle with their affairs, which meant most nations remained vigilant against these marriages. However, the Empire was on the lenient side in making allowances. There were some kingdoms in the West with strict social hierarchies that entirely forbade marriage to foreigners and between people of unequal social rank, like those between commoners and nobles. Only unions equal to one's bloodline were acceptable.

“It may be extremely unlikely, but it’s still possible. The ambassador may know people with enough political clout to push it past the empty throne.”

“Yeah, but would someone with that amount of power go out of their way to pester the royal family? Especially when the Empire is in shambles. If they’ve got a girl of marrying age, my guess is that the family will want to prioritize domestic relationships first.”

“Hmm… Maybe they’re ready to call it quits with the Empire.”

“Not a chance. It would be a possibility if they were on the verge of dissolving. The Empire might split up, but it’s far from completely sinking. It’s too soon to say they’re closing up shop.” Wein paused and grinned. “In other words, I’m not going to marry anyone from the Empire. So, cheer up.”

“…I’m not upset.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire! You’re totally pissed at me! Aw, Ninym, you’re so cute when you’re blushiOWOWOWOWOW?!”

“I’ve been thinking for a while now that I could probably add a few more joints to your arm…”

“No! Please! I only need one! Capped at my elbow!”

Ninym let go of Wein’s arm indignantly. “I wasn’t blushing.”

“I know. Forgive me. You weren’t blushing and you weren’t in a sour mood. You’re the same standout cutie and super-beautiful chick as always. Are we good now?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously…?”

After shuddering slightly as Ninym gave a satisfied nod, Wein pulled himself together.

“In any case, it’ll be impossible for the ambassador to find someone worthy of my station, and even if he does, I’m not planning to accept any proposals. Including nobles in Natra.”

Ninym’s eyes slightly widened at this. It would make sense to avoid getting tangled up in the current tumultuous state of the Empire. But what could possibly motivate him to refuse getting betrothed to one of his own people?

It hit Ninym hard.

“Wein, could it be…” she asked with a trembling voice, “…that you’re interested in men?”

“I’m going to squeeze your boobs.”

“Each squeeze will cost one finger.”

“Miss Standout Cutie, don’t you think that’s a hefty price to pay?!”

“Tell me your reason, and I’ll give you a discount.”

What a bad business practice. Wein answered. “It’s really not that complicated, y’know? I mean, basically—I’m gonna sell out the country the minute I get the chance anyway.”

“……” Ninym put her hand over her eyes.

“From the perspective of a hopeful bride, they’ll be coming here with the expectation of becoming the queen to a future king. But those dreams would be totally obliterated. I’d feel bad.”

“…If you’re able to have any sympathy at all, I’d say you should put a hard stop at committing treason.”

“Nope, it’s definitely happening. My heart is set on tossing away duty and responsibility and enjoying a life of leisure!”

“…I see.”

“I’ve answered your question. And? How much do your boobs cost now?”

“Two fingers.”

“Are you seriously jacking up the price?!”

Ninym gave an exaggerated sigh. “Honestly… I think I’d rather pray the ambassador brings along someone you can’t refuse.”

“Good luck finding her. Wanna bet on it?”

“All right. If I win, I’ll shove a boiled potato up your nose.”

“Oh, now we’re talkin’. You haven’t got a chance.”

With the challenge on, Wein let out a laugh.

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“I’ve done it.”

“Huh?”

A few weeks had passed since their first meeting. At the very start of their second interaction, that was the first thing out of Teord’s mouth.

“Done what…?” Wein asked nervously.

Teord replied with some hesitation. “It may have been presumptuous of me. Upon hearing that you were a bachelor, I searched far and wide in the Empire for a suitable prospect to strengthen the bond between our nations.”

“I see, yes, that… I would have appreciated a warning.”

“My apologies. I couldn’t say for certain whether I would be able to find a suitable girl, you see…”

Teord had a point. If he’d failed to deliver, he would have lost face. And he really couldn’t have taken that risk during their last meeting. Because Wein understood this, he didn’t press the issue. Besides, he had other problems.

“I understand. Let’s just move on… You’re saying you’ve found her?”

“I did.”

“……”

Wein indirectly looked at Ninym, who was standing by him as his aide. She was smiling brightly. It was a grin of someone totally prepared to shove a potato up his nose.

I’ll shut this thing down if it’s the last thing I do, he thought.

“First of all, Ambassador Talum, allow me to offer my thanks. After all, you did go to great pains for my benefit. But I am a member of the royal family. I don’t know who you’ve found, but the criteria for choosing the future queen are strict,” Wein warned.

Teord nodded with zero hesitation. “I am aware of this, of course. And there are…no problems in that regard.”

“Hmph…”

Wein considered Teord’s behavior. The ambassador must have been confident that Wein and this girl he found would fall in love at first sight if he was insisting that there would be no problems. But something was off. If Teord had been acting as he had in the last meeting, it wouldn’t have seemed strange for him to be worked up. But why was he so fidgety this time?

I’m guessing she checks all the boxes…but comes with a complication. Maybe? he speculated as he spoke up.

“Ambassador Talum, you seem restless. Could it be there’s something about this candidate that I should be concerned about?”

“N-no! Absolutely nothing of the sort!” Teord’s voice rose in a panic. “Her features are perfectly elegant, and you could not ask for a disposition more befitting of a lady. She is sharp enough even I can tell. I believe she’ll strike a chord with you, Your Highness. But…”

He trailed off.

Beautiful, mild-mannered, and intelligent. In the face of all this, Teord’s reaction could only mean—

“What about her pedigree?”

“____” Teord’s shoulders shook slightly.

Bull’s-eye, Wein thought.

Just as Ninym assumed, the ambassador didn’t have any connections to influential nobles. Which meant he must have sniffed out some low-ranking aristocrat on the verge of ruin.

In that case, it’d be easy to refuse her. Wein adopted a cool tone.

“I know that I’m repeating myself, but I am a member of the royal family. I don’t know this girl, but I can’t accept anyone whose family lacks similar standing.”

Wein laid out a justifiable reason for refusal—social barriers. At this rate, his opponent would have no choice but withdraw. He felt confident in his victory, but Teord spoke up just as Wein was watching the mental potato fade away from his mind.

“Um, there’s no problem with that, either.”

“Huh?” Wein blinked back.

“Well, I should say that there is something about her status you should keep in mind…”

“…Hmm? What? If you’re saying there’s no problem, it’s unlikely she’s the daughter of a baron or viscount. Did you find a lady from the house of some famous earl?”

“……” Teord remained silent.

But Wein could tell it wasn’t because he’d hit the nail on the head. *Why won’t he speak up?*

Wein finally realized something: Teord wasn’t uneasy from anxiety or impatience but from not fulfilling the parameters assigned to him.

It was the panic of a humble man who had reaped a harvest far larger than he could handle.

“Ambassador Talum. Could she have a ranking…higher than the daughter of an earl?”

“…Yes.”

“…A marquis?”

“…Higher.”

“…A duke?”

“…One more above that.”

“…Wait, that would leave us with…”

Wein's cheek twitched, and Teord nodded. His voice was a mixture of nerves and trepidation.

"Your Highness, the one interested in becoming your betrothed is our Earthworld Empire's Second Imperial Princess…Her Royal Highness Lowellmina Earthworld—"

From this sudden marriage proposal that had appeared out of the blue, a new sweltering wind arose in Natra, where the cold winter days loomed ahead. In time, this era would be known as the Great War of Kings.

The curtains for the second act were about to rise on one key player: Wein Salema Arbalest.

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Marriage is a tool of political strategy for royalty and the nobility.

You may ask why. After all, it's a significant milestone, but it doesn't shackle people together physically. It just means that all concerned parties recognize the couple is married. Why would this be a political problem?

It is this recognition that is what's important. This information can alter circumstances and become a catalyst for change. Even feuding families will have reason to shake hands if their children marry, offering respite from immediate threats of violence and putting the public at ease. Such guarantees allow everyone to return their full attention to business and agriculture and causes the economy to boom. This all might sound like a joke, but the marriages of royalty and the nobility have the power to bring this to life.

Which was why people recognized the seriousness of this affair. And the potential for profit naturally gave rise to the concept of political marriage.

It was perfectly normal for a meeting with the senior vassals to be called to discuss a possible marriage between Wein and the Earthworld Empire's Imperial Princess.

"It's a fine arrangement."

This matter was well-received for the most part.

"The Imperial Princess is a suitable candidate for Prince Wein. If this union is established, it will secure the alliance between our nations and promise further prosperity."

"It won't be that simple."

Of course, there were those ready to give their honest opinion.

"Without their Emperor, the Empire is on fire right now. We've been able to keep our distance as an independent ally, but that won't be the case if we

have ties to the Imperial family."

There was some truth to that, but it wasn't enough to convince the others.

"There's already a good chance that we'll be wrapped up in their mess regardless of marriage. Wouldn't it be better for us to unite now?"

"Aye. Turmoil or not, the authority of the Empire is alive and well. With Cavarin to the west, we must exercise great caution, so at the very least, we should establish strong relations with the East."

"But just look at the difference in strength between us and the Empire. If our relationship with them ends up going south, they'll annex us."

"You sure you aren't saying that because you want your own daughter to be the princess?"

"What was that?!"

"Now, now, let's calm down. This isn't the time to argue."

This was the way the meeting continued for a while. One of the vassals turned to Ninym, who had been standing in the corner.

"Lady Ninym, is the Imperial Princess going to meet us here of her own accord?"

Ninym nodded and took one step forward with documents in hand.

"With their request to discuss marriage, we received word that the Empire wishes to send an envoy to Natra before the winter sets in—under the pretext of confirming and strengthening our alliance. But the representative is Imperial Princess Lowellmina herself, which means this will mark the start of their courtship, giving Their Highnesses a chance to meet one another."

The vassals looked at each other.

"I suppose you can call this 'proactive' on their part."

"No, it's recklessness."

"Did none of her retainers advise against this…?"

It would have been one thing if there was an official engagement, but they were still in the preliminary discussion stages. To extract a royal from a heavily guarded palace to meet an unfamiliar member of a foreign royal family on their land? It was as ill-advised as walking into a forest at night in nothing but underwear.

Though the Empire was going through some internal turmoil, their power had to have been well anchored—strongly enough that they must have been certain nothing scandalous would happen in this situation. But place an alluring woman in front of any healthy man, and he'll give in to temptation,

no question. It'd be ludicrous not to consider the risk of a premarital affair.

Indeed, the Empire must have calculated this possibility. And yet, Princess Lowellmina was still going to pay them a visit.

"Hmph… What are your thoughts, Your Highness?"

The senior vassals' attention turned toward Wein, who had remained silent at the head of the table.

"Hmm…" Wein looked at each vassal in turn and shrugged his shoulders comically. "We should fix the cracks in the outer wall before Her Highness gets here."

The room erupted into laughter.

"Yes, we do have to keep up appearances, more or less." "Where's the money for the paint gonna come from?" "Why not try covering it up with snow?" "Good idea, then it'll just melt away on its own in spring."

The vassals joked and bantered with one another for some time. Once they finally got a hold of themselves, Wein continued.

"I'm sure this has been a shock to everyone. Honestly, I felt the same way. I'm thinking word might come even tomorrow that this was all a mistake."

Stifled laughter threatened to break out among the vassals again.

Wein pressed on. "But if there is no mistake, I want to look into this with optimism."

Their faces tensed. Wein had only expressed his opinion, but as their master, he had enough power over all concerned to put them in their place.

"There's an undeniable concern that we'll be dragged into the Empire's mess. But forging a connection to the Imperial family would provide huge advantages. We can't let this chance pass us by." Wein paused to give a wry grin. "That said, I have no idea if I can even handle being a married man yet."

"Well, there is no one more blessed by wisdom and benevolence than you, Your Highness."

"I'm certain the princess will realize upon her arrival that she's made the right decision in choosing you."

The vassals nodded in unison, and Wein beamed.

"Well then, let's make sure we give a warm welcome to Her Highness. I'm counting on you all."

""Understood!""

With that, the preparations for the arrival of the Imperial Princess went

into full swing.

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——A little later.

"I SERIOUSLY WANNA TURN HER DOOOOOWN!"

Wein was back to clutching his head in his office as usual.

"This is a trap, one hundred percent! It's plain weird that the princess would want to discuss marrying me! Geez, like, think about the gap in power!"

Let's look at an example of two earls.

In the context of the greater peerage system, both are the same rank, but depending on their individual assets and military might, it's not at all rare for the more powerful one to be treated with more reverence.

The same principle is true for royal families.

Royals have a one-of-a-kind status in their country and a bloodline that puts them above every other citizen. But their true value is largely dependent on the might of their nation. If the gap in power between nations is astronomical, it will be reflected in the standing of their royal families. And this was undoubtedly the case between Natra and the Empire. Anyone with common sense could see the Imperial Princess was out of Natra's league.

Yet, the reality was that a marriage proposal had been dropped in their lap.

"In other words, there must be a serious political reason behind this decision," Ninym said.

Wein groaned. "Yeah, that makes the most sense… What do *you* think that motive is?"

"My guess is that it has to do with the disputes among the factions backing the various Imperial princes."

At present, the three princes of the Empire were vying for the throne. They hadn't resorted to the use of force yet, but there didn't seem to be an end in sight, and there were rumors that it was only a matter of time before civil war broke out.

"I'm guessing the princess aligned herself with one of those three factions. Maybe they're sending her to form a tie with Natra in the hopes of giving their faction a leg up in this race?"

“Seems legit,” Wein agreed with a nod. “—Well, that’s gonna be the lie that they want us to believe.”

Ninym shot him a puzzled look. “A trap… You’re saying there’s greater reason?”

“Yeah. And to take it a step further, I’d say they have no plans of going through with the marriage at all.”

Wein observed Ninym widen her eyes in his periphery as he continued on bitterly.

“I’m sure you agree, Ninym, that coming here before the marriage is set in stone is bonkers.”

“It does seem suspicious.”

“Well, why are they acting this way? Because there’s an underlying reason why they want to reach Natra before winter. They prepared an envoy as a pretext for laying the groundwork and even set up the talk of marriage to further their hidden agenda. If they’re taking it this far, we can’t possibly refuse their arrival.”

“……” Ninym folded her arms.

As Wein said, if it’d been either an envoy or a proposal, they might have been able to deny the Empire’s offer—but not if they were pushing both at the same time. To do otherwise would be to allow their alliance to fall to pieces.

“And the major red flag is that the marriage hasn’t been settled yet. If the ultimate goal is to align Natra with a faction, they should be stubbornly pushing this marriage on us rather than dragging things out. It’s not like we can refuse. Think of the power difference,” Wein went on.

“But they haven’t done that. Even though they’re taking on a huge risk—I mean, their princess is visiting a foreign land—they’ll definitely make some excuse, like incompatible personalities, to let them back out last minute. Starting to sound fishy?”

Ninym involuntarily moaned. When he put it like that, there was a ring of truth to it, but it did raise one question.

“…Then why would they go so far and come all this way to Natra?”

Wein grinned. “——I have no idea!”

He continued as Ninym glared at him reproachfully.

“Well, what do you want me to do? I’ve looked at it from every angle, and I can’t figure it out. My best lead is that they specified their arrival to be

before winter, so I can only assume it has to be pretty urgent."

Wein grumbled as he put his chin in his hands. "If the marriage was a wash from the very beginning, it'd be ridiculous for us to scrape together a budget to wine and dine them. I just wanna tell 'em to stay home."

"But your position won't allow that."

"Sadly." Wein clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Geez, these pranksters have rotten personalities for sure. We're already in a bad state after going to war. How are they expecting us to come up with *more* money?" Wein looked up at the ceiling irritably.

"Is it all right to keep this from your vassals?"

"I plan on telling a few, but I'll let the majority simply prepare for their arrival. We've got to show the official envoy proper respect, no matter their endgame. If I'm being totally honest, my vassals don't know how to employ psychological tactics to uncover ulterior motives and remain outwardly hospitable at the same time."

"That's… Well, I suppose it's not completely untrue."

Ninym didn't dislike Wein's vassal lords, who were what some might call simple, honest souls—for better or worse.

"By the way, is there a chance that you're overthinking things?"

"Sure. But that doesn't explain why the princess is coming to see me directly."

"Hmm…" Ninym thought for a moment, then hit a fist against her palm in a sudden revelation. "Like, for example, she could have fallen in love upon seeing you looking all hot on the battlefield and… Whoopsie. I was about to voice something impossible."

"I would have liked you to finish that thought, Miss Ninym! I have feelings, too, you know!"

"Oh, don't get it twisted. You're the young crown prince regent who led us to glorious victory in the battle against Marden. Loved by your subjects, myself included, you're a magnificent…average-looking guy."

"Oh, come on! If you're gonna hype me up this much, the least you can do is call me hot!"

"As the lead retainer, committing slander would be indecent of me."

"You're always lying to me! Who do you think you are?!"

"Me." Ninym squished up the corners of her mouth with her fingers into a smile without the slightest hint of fear.

Wein gave a low *Grrrr* and retorted. "…All right, I've got an idea!"

"An idea?"

"I'm going off your idea! The princess *has* fallen in love with me because I'm a hottie!"

"Wha…?" Ninym's face was a mix of exasperation and confusion.

"You know, my luck has been terrible lately, now that I'm thinking about it: The Emperor passed away at the worst possible moment; the mine is all dried up; Marden got destroyed!"

"You had shoddy luck before all that, too."

"Shut it! Anyway, it's about time I bounce back! Lady Luck is smiling down on me, and I'll be blessed with an innocent princess who finds me totally irresistible—and a life of leisure and luxury!"

"——Hyah."

"Ugh."

Ninym's open hand jabbed Wein in the rib cage.

"Have you calmed down?"

"You didn't give me much of a choice…"

Ninym continued as Wein rubbed his side. "In any case, let's sound things out as we fine-tune our plan with the Empire. We can rethink things once we've gathered more information on what the Imperial Princess could be up to, if anything."

"Yeah. I'll think about where I can scrounge up some funds."

With their plan in order, Ninym turned on her heel.

Wein called out as she was walking away. "Ah, by the way, Ninym."

"Yes, whatever could it be?"

"Am I really not hot?"

Ninym stared blankly for a moment, then gave a small smile as she turned up her mouth with her fingers.

"Your Majesty is a magnificently average-looking guy."

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Since ancient times, there hasn't been a way to make people stop talking—this was especially true when it came to the sensational topic of the crown prince's betrothal.

It was major enough to spread like wildfire, following talk about Natra's

victory, from the palace to the town at the snap of a finger.

Most people welcomed it with open arms as a stroke of good fortune in their alliance with the Empire, enhancing their favorable perception of Wein.

“Our alliance with the Empire is gonna be rock-solid.”

“I’m certain this will put the ill king at ease”

“I wonder what their child’s name will be?”

“Ha-ha-ha, don’t get carried away.”

The marriage hadn’t even been officially announced, but the townspeople were already on the verge of celebration. And this conversation was on the rational side of things to boot, especially since no one in this country knew the appearance of this Imperial Princess. Naturally, that meant she was the subject of a host of speculations and dramatizations.

Rumors flew across town: The tamer ones were about how the princess’s voice was more beautiful than any jewel, her looks more stunning than the gods’. The wilder ones guessed that the princess and prince had a past while he was studying in the Empire and had rendezvoused in secret.

It was all nonsense, of course, but Wein didn’t want to rain on their parade, so he gave orders to leave the matter be. Even Ninym found no reason to object.

And object she didn’t—but the situation had changed lately. It wasn’t the townspeople, but those in the palace who had taken things in an odd direction.

Ninym was the reason for this change.

After all, it was the undeniable truth that Wein had relied on Ninym heavily. As the aide of the crown prince, everyone in the palace assumed her to be his favorite concubine. Which is why they began to question: What would become of her once Wein was married?

“Will she run from the palace in despair?”

“No way! To think our Lady would leave his side…”

“But the Imperial Princess may not forgive him for keeping a mistress, depending on her disposition, and she could even try to push Lady Ninym away.”

“Hmm… This is his aide we’re talking about. I’d like to think the princess won’t be able to do anything rash.”

These hushed whispers making their rounds through the palace were the reason Ninym looked troubled. She was considering how to approach it while

still dealing with government affairs, but…

"What do you make of the situation, Lady Ninym?!"

"Really? Are you seriously asking me this to my face…?"

Upon closing their discussion with the Empire, Ninym was catching her breath in the hallway when a few young ladies of the court caught up to her.

"Of course, I am. Everyone is curious, after all."

"That's right. The love triangle between His Highness, the Imperial Princess, and Lady Ninym is too irresistible to pass up."

"I don't recall being in a love triangle…"

How exaggerated had the rumors gotten?

With astonishment and confusion, Ninym replied, "I shall make it known that I have no intention of leaving the palace. I am certain whoever His Highness's betrothed will be, she and I will get along well."

These were her true feelings. After all, she confronted a mountain of political challenges that stacked up against her on a daily basis. How could winning over a sheltered princess possibly be any more difficult?

"Now that I have made this clear, let others know and do not allow these strange rumors to spread any further. It is difficult to say how His Highness would feel if they were to reach his ears."

This was what made Ninym nervous. She didn't particularly care about the rumors about her. But Wein was human, too, meaning he could unleash his wrath if provoked. There was a decent chance that the whispers circulating throughout the palace could set him off.

"Tch, fine." "You're no fun, Lady Ninym." "Now, now. What did you expect?"

Ninym sighed internally at the court ladies, who reluctantly obeyed her wishes. As a frequent mediator between Wein and his vassals, she was aware of her position and treatment of others: To those who were revered, she was as polite as possible. To those receptive to her brutal honesty, she was more casual. Her relationship with the ladies of the court was harmonious for the most part, but she regretted not taking on a more commanding and cool presence in this situation.

That said, it was difficult to please everybody.

Ninym quickly changed the subject. "Well, I'll be returning to work. Let me repeat that you should avoid invoking His Highness's wrath. I'm sure you're aware of what happened to those who provoked him in the past. I'll let

you know that even I won't be able to stop him."

Upon hearing the direct threat, the ladies nodded uncomfortably. With that settled, Ninym turned on her heel conclusively.

Now that I've hammered that down, this should quiet down, she thought, half filled with wishful thinking.

That said, with their excitement… If Wein's right and this is a trap without any actual plans of marriage, everyone is going to be bummed out.

As she strutted down the hallway, she mulled over his hypothesis in her mind. She knew the depth of his prudence. A glimpse at the wisdom in some of his remarks was enough to send a chill down her spine and remind her not to take them lightly.

At the same time, she wondered in her heart if calling it a trap was taking things too far. Even Wein had said he was unsure of the Empire's true motive.

But if Wein is mistaken, and it really is someone's ploy to strengthen their faction…

…then just as he'd told his vassals, he would marry the princess without fail. It was all political. She understood that. He was a member of Natra's royal family, which meant he could never take a woman without wealth and status as his wife.

"……" Ninym slapped her cheeks lightly. "I better get back to Wein."

She quickened her pace down the hallway toward the office, exchanging pleasantries and chatting briefly with the occasional vassal or guard, when

"Ninym." A stern voice called out from behind her.

Ninym stopped and turned on her heels. Not many in the palace called her by her first name alone. There was the king, Prince Wein, his younger sister Falanya, and—

"Master Levan." She bowed deeply as she addressed him.

Levan had a stiffness about him that was obvious at a glance. His features were severe; order and discipline were evident in his gait; and he gave off an impression of forged steel.

But more unique were his hair and eyes, which were white and red, respectively. In other words, he was a Flahm, just like Ninym.

"We can walk and chat at the same time. Do you have a minute?" he asked.

“Of course. Could this concern the proposed marriage?”

“Naturally.”

The two spoke as they walked side by side down the hallway.

“News has reached the ears of His Royal Majesty. He wishes to know the details.”

“If that were the case, I would have gladly come if called upon.”

Levan snorted. “Heh, I can’t ask anything unreasonable of the next family head.”

Ninym chuckled wryly. “Says the current head, Master Levan.”

Since ancient times, the Flahm had been persecuted across the continent—particularly in the West. Those who had settled in the Kingdom of Natra after wandering through many lands were only a subgroup. The king at the time had accepted the oppressed Flahm and welcomed their deep insight from a life of traveling the continent. Among them was the leader of their people, a Flahm named Ralei, who had been in the king’s favor and served as his lifelong aide. From then on, a successive line of talented Flahm descendants had been appointed to new generations of kings.

Three traditions were born in the process.

First, the Flahm were to be carefully selected by the royal family to serve as their aides.

Second, those Flahm would be given the surname of Ralei.

And finally, the aide to the one who ascended to the throne would become the head of the Flahm.

Levan Ralei had served as the aide to the current king, which meant he was the current head of the Flahm living in Natra.

“And how’s that discussion actually going?”

“In terms of the reports of the emissary, the offer appears legitimate. The Imperial Princess Lowellmina herself will visit Natra before the official discussions.”

“Oh my. I guess it’s not a joke.”

“But His Highness believes something else may be going on…”

“Hmm… Have you any heard reports on Princess Lowellmina from subordinates?”

As with other countries, Natra had a network of spies. But it was special in having a second network spread across the continent via the diasporic Flahm. Levan had once managed it, but that duty was now left to Ninym.

“Nothing of substance. The princess usually shuts herself away in the palace, but she’s appeared at ceremonies and soirees on occasion. But no information has proved especially useful.” She shook her head. “With the political fighting among the three Imperial princes causing chaos, the reports say more research into the princess will take time.”

“I see… I have to wonder if someone urged this sheltered girl into marriage.”

“Do you think someone is pulling the strings behind the princess?”

“That’s what I’m inclined to think… Well, it might be different if His Highness and the princess are already acquainted with one another. Are they?”

Ninym shook her head. “No. It would seem that way from the rumors, but in reality…”

Wein and Ninym were essentially two peas in a pod, coordinating constantly. This had been true even while he was studying abroad in the Empire. Of course, there were times when they worked separately—but it was impossible to think that he could have met and become familiar with the princess in these short bursts of time. Plus, Wein himself said he didn’t know her.

“I see… And he hasn’t turned down the offer yet, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct. He intends to follow through with it.”

“Then all is well. It would be a disaster if he angered them because he didn’t feel like it.”

“……”

As she’d expected, other people were under the impression that Wein couldn’t turn it down. They saw nothing odd about that. Wein’s words about Natra getting lured by the Empire crossed the back of her mind.

I wonder if there’s another motive here as Wein suspects…

As she considered this, Levan continued as if delivering a soliloquy.

“But I’m certain His Highness understands that would be an impossible undertaking—especially being who he is. Even at a young age, he controls his own emotions and excels at seeing the whole picture… Looking at His Royal Majesty and His Highness makes it clear our royal family comes from a truly monstrous lineage.”

Ninym paused her thoughts and frowned. “Master Levan, I don’t think I would go as far as calling them ‘monsters.’”

“—I’m not wrong.” Levan’s tone was surprisingly brusque. He stopped in place.

A beat passed before Ninym turned to look back at him. He had a far-off expression.

“It’s been about two hundred years since the founding of the Kingdom of Natra. His Royal Majesty is the fourteenth king, and he has been wise and great since his youth, as has Wein… But it’s impossible for a royal family to maintain the authority necessary to run a nation for this many generations.”

“That’s…”

It was true. Even if someone flipped back through the entire history of the continent, there weren’t many countries that had lasted as long as Natra. Those with an iota of wisdom and a succession of kings who were proactive in leading the nation numbered even fewer. In most cases, kings from long dynasties had no interest in politics and were liable to sink into hedonistic self-indulgence. Their authority and political might would weaken and at last be eaten alive by the beast known as “ruin.”

“Power corrupts people. The first generation that builds the country with blood and sweat can withstand that temptation. The first and second generations have a sense of discipline. But then they hit a roadblock. If the nation becomes solid as a rock, past hardship becomes history, and all the sweat and blood is wiped away. They become a long line of nobility and royalty who lack any awareness of pain or anguish.” Levan gave a heavy sigh.

“They have no knowledge or experience of fighting for something. Everything has been handed to them on a silver platter from a young age. And during their developmental stages, when they’re still not in control of their emotions and egos, they hear others tell them, ‘You’re special,’ and ‘You’re of noble birth,’ like a curse.”

“You’re saying it’s natural for rulers to become twisted?”

“That’s right. To be perfectly honest, even royalty are human. It makes sense that they would grow warped. It’s odder to have authority and not abuse it.”

This was what made Wein and his family monstrous.

To not become warped, extravagant, or lax. Levan was commenting on the ability of the long line of royals that continued to carry out their duties honorably as if it were a matter of course.

“Considering even the founding King Salema had an unorthodox past himself… Yes, perhaps it was passed down in the blood. Our ancestor Ralei had a keen eye in choosing Natra. By supporting this nation, I’m certain our wish will one day be—”

“Master Levan.” Ninym interrupted the growing passion in Levan’s words.

He got a hold of himself and issued a slight cough, catching his breath. “In any case, I now understand the situation. I’ve taken up much of your time. I’ll be returning to His Royal Majesty.”

The current king was recuperating from an illness away from the palace, and his care had been entrusted to Levan. Because of that, both had rarely made any appearances recently.

“I understand he’s busy, but please tell Prince Wein to visit sometime soon. We can get Princess Falanya to visit him almost every day, but His Royal Majesty wishes to see his son on occasion.”

“I understand.”

“Good day.” Levan turned on his heel and left to return to the king’s side.

As she watched him leave, Ninym gave a single grievous sigh.

“You’re finally done talking.”

“AaaaAACK?!” Ninym physically leaped into the air at the sudden voice behind her.

She turned around to face the surprise newcomer—a boy around her age, maybe a little younger. He didn’t have much of a presence, but he did have white hair and red eyes, indicating he was another Flahm.

“You’re too inattentive, Ninym. And to think you’re supposed to also serve as Wein’s guard.”

“…I would have noticed if it wasn’t you.” Ninym steadied her racing breath. “And, Nanaki, stop calling him ‘Wein’ where other people can hear.”

“We’re the only ones around.”

“Your pride will get you in trouble.”

“Geez, Ninym. As annoying as ever.”

“You… Never mind, just forget it.”

Upon realizing they were getting nowhere fast, Ninym squashed down her true feeling as her cheeks twitched slightly.

“Well, what do you want? Something you can’t say in front of Master Levan?”

“No, I just didn’t say anything earlier because I don’t like dealing with him.”

“…Well, what is it?”

“I want you to see Falanya.”

“Princess Falanya?” Ninym blinked back.

Falanya Elk Arbalest. The crown princess for the Kingdom of Natra. With a cheerful and kindhearted disposition, she was two years younger than Wein and beloved by everyone in the palace. And this boy in front of Ninym, Nanaki Ralei, was the Flahm chosen to serve as her guard.

“Come to think of it, I’ve been so busy that I haven’t been able to see her lately… Did she ask you to call for me?”

“No.” Nanaki shook his head. “I’m not sure why, but she’s been bummed out lately. Holly said it’d be good for her to see you.”

Holly was the chamberlain who primarily cared for Falanya, and she was excellent at picking up on people’s emotional states, unlike Nanaki. Ninym considered for a minute why Holly might call her before coming to a conclusion.

“…I see, so that’s it.” She looked at Nanaki. “Where is Princess Falanya now?”

“This is around the time when she studies in her room.”

“Come on. Let’s get going.”

Ninym and Nanaki made their way to the princess’s room.

“The temperate climate of the area surrounding Weiulles Lake in the southeastern part of the continent has blessed it with fertile lands, causing it to change hands often since ancient times due to conflict.”

A hoarse voice droned on through the room.

“This fighting was put to an end sixty years ago when a country with enough military might to suppress the entire region was formed. That country became known as ‘Earthworld.’”

The owner of the voice was an elderly man named Claudius. Originally a jurist from the West, he was a wise scholar who had also been Wein’s childhood instructor.

He’d grown more skilled and aware of justice in his old age. But since he

had no fear of criticizing even the royals and nobility that he judged as evil, most of his life had been spent receiving invitations from those of influence, only to be driven out once he incurred their wrath. More than one assassin had gone after him. But this man wasn't only intelligent: He was a top-notch swordsman. He continued to turn the tables on his attackers until he finally arrived in Natra. And because Natra suited either him or his old age, he quit his antagonizing ways and took up a career of educating children.

"But their attempt to forcibly suppress other countries resulted in bloodshed, leaving disorder and chaos in its wake. To prevent these countries and their tribes from revolting, the Empire chose to use force and military power to establish its strength domestically and abroad."

On the receiving end of this lecture was a girl with a baby face. Her name was Falanya Elk Arbalest. With a middle name reflecting that of King Elkrad, who led the resurgence of the Kingdom of Natra, she was the nation's crown princess.

"The Empire absorbed nations big and small, with the most notable ones being Burnoch, Codlafy, Fufart, and Todrelan. Also the Gairan State, which shares an eastern border with Natra and was originally known as the Kingdom of Antgadull. But unlike the other nations, when the sovereign was offered vassalage—" Claudius brought his lecture to a sudden halt.

With a small sigh, he warned with a piercing voice: "Princess Falanya."

"Whhhaaa?!"

Bang. Hitting the desk, Falanya snapped her head up in a panic and straightened her posture as if she'd been paying the utmost attention to his lesson the entire time.

But Claudius had seen this same trick hundreds of thousands of times.

"It seems that your mind is elsewhere today."

"Ack… I'm sorry," she apologized, instead of making up an excuse. She was pure of heart.

But as the royal tutor, Claudius had to dish out the brutal truth.

"As royalty, you must remember that your words and actions are inherently political. Haven't I taught you not to apologize so easily?"

"Ah, I'm sor…I mean, yes, of course. I remember."

"Very good… There's no need to be formal with me, but until you can separate your public and private spheres, you must put on your best face even with me to familiarize yourself with appropriate behavior."

“I understand. Thank you, Claudius.”

The elderly man smiled. “All right. Let’s stop here for today.”

“What? But…”

“It’s pointless to try to learn if you’re not in the mood to listen, Your Highness. If you’re concerned about cutting our session short, I advise you to try to resolve whatever is on your mind before our next lesson.” Claudius looked past Falanya. “Perfect timing. A guide has come to lead the way.”

When she turned around, Falanya saw Ninym standing in front of the door.

“I’ll leave the rest to our esteemed aide. Good day, Your Highness.” Claudius gathered his materials and excused himself from the room.

Ninym approached Falanya and kneeled. “Princess Falanya, I received word that a shadow has been cast over your heart. I’ve come to pay you an overdue visit.”

“Ninym… Um.”

“I understand. Am I right to assume it concerns Prince Wein’s marriage?” Ninym speculated.

“……” Falanya nodded.

I knew it, the aide mentally noted.

It was no secret that Falanya revered her brother—to the point that she’d become dispirited when he’d studied abroad in the Empire. Now faced with the possibility of an upcoming marriage, Falanya was worried he might leave her side and go far away.

“No need for concern, Princess Falanya. Even if His Highness chooses to marry, there is no way he’d leave the country. After all, he is the crown prince of Natra.”

Ninym didn’t realize that Falanya had stopped responding until she was done talking.

“Princess Falanya?”

“I know he’ll stay here even if he get married…but I doubt things will ever be the same,” she admitted in a strained voice. “It’s like, right as I managed to wrap my head around Father being ill and Wein becoming the regent, there’s this new possibility that he’s going to get married…”

Falanya lowered her gaze, staring fixedly at her fingers. Her eyes reflected two small hands holding nothing at all.

“It feels like everything is changing. And I’m the only one being left

behind."

"……"

Falanya wasn't playing the victim or being paranoid.

In fact, the Kingdom of Natra was opening itself to the possibility of a revolution—with Wein as its epicenter. Falanya couldn't be the only one who felt lonely and anxious about this situation.

Ninym knew Falanya didn't need to be persuaded, and she called upon her own heart to answer her.

"You're right. Our country is undergoing great change. Even I'd drown in this raging torrent if I lose focus." Ninym clasped her hands over the princess's fingers. "But it's not like everything is going to be different. We all have things that remain constant in our lives, no matter what."

"Like…?"

Ninym beamed. "Like, how you and the prince hold each other very dear."

With an assertion this forward, Falanya couldn't hold herself back from blushing, which warmed the aide's heart.

"Let's say this courtship leads to Prince Wein forming a union. Even then, he'd never neglect you, Princess Falanya. I think you are just as precious to him as he is to you."

"……"

"Don't you believe in Prince Wein?"

"I want to, but I have my doubts… Is that strange?"

"No, not at all. And I know how to resolve them." Ninym took her hand. "Let's pay the prince a visit to share your anxieties and talk it out. What you need more than anything is time together with him."

"…I'm worried I'll get in his way."

"If I may borrow his words, 'Any big brother who thinks his little sister is a bother is a failure of a sibling.' Well then—"

Urged on by Ninym, Falanya stood up timidly and shyly spoke to Ninym as if she were a younger sister asking to get spoiled.

"Will you come with me, Ninym?"

"Of course." Ninym smiled gently and set out alongside the princess.

"—I see your point."

Wein had been listening quietly in his office to Falanya.

He gave her a small nod. "I'm sorry, Falanya. I made you feel all alone."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Wein." She shook her head from side to side.

Wein stroked his fingers through her hair. "You felt like you were being left behind, huh."

He was turning the issue over in his mind. It was easy to comfort her, but this was temporary. It wouldn't solve anything when she needed a rock. She needed emotional support that could keep these feelings of alienation and powerlessness from crushing her.

...I was hoping to hold off until I had more political power, but I guess there's no helping it.

Wein shot Ninym a quick glance, which she immediately understood, and she gave a small nod in agreement.

"All right. In that case, Falanya, do you think you could help me with some of my work?"

"Your work…acting in Father's stead?"

"That's right. As you know, the Empire will be sending an envoy to Natra in the coming days, and I imagine I'll be spending all my time hosting them during their stay. But it's not as if my to-do list and problems will hold off in the meantime."

It was more like, bad things tended to trigger each other and pile up, one after another. In light of that, Wein wanted as much help as he could get.

"Of course, Ninym and the vassals will be taking care of everything else while I have my hands full. But I imagine there will be things that call for my approval or presence."

"And would I…?"

"Exactly." Wein nodded. "It goes without saying, but you don't know enough to take on complex problems in national politics. I'll have my trusted vassals stay by your side if I need you to do something for me. If something needs my consent or comment, ask for their opinion and follow their instructions. In other words, you'll be a figurehead.

"However," he continued, "your status as royalty is enough to get things rolling in situations that prioritize authority and procedure. And you could gain some experience by simply participating and observing things for

yourself. What do you think? Wanna give it a try?"

It was a rhetorical question. He already knew her answer, based on the resolute spirit he had just witnessed breaking out across her face.

"—I'll do it. No, I insist that you let me, Wein."

Wein gave a satisfied nod. "I'll hold you to that. Then I'll move forward with my plans with that in mind."

He concluded, "Falanya, let me say one more thing. In this world, determination isn't enough to guarantee your desired outcome. But it takes courage to take the first step through sheer will. As your big brother, I'm proud to see you possess this strength."

"_____"

Falanya was taken aback for a moment before her whole face lit up as she beamed from ear to ear.

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Ninym and Falanya walked down the hallway side by side. Falanya had a spring to her step and seemed to be humming.

"Ninym, did you hear him? Wein said he was proud of me."

"I did. I'm happy to witness your growth before my own eyes, too, Princess Falanya," Ninym answered with a grin.

"I'll do my very best, Ninym! I'll make sure I won't let him down!"

"I may not be able to do much, but I'll assist you in any way that I can. But be careful not to overexert yourself. We need to conserve our energy until the envoy arrives," Ninym pointed out.

Falanya calmed down a notch. "You're right. I start once the envoy and the Imperial Princess arrive—"

She stopped short of finishing her sentence, going totally silent for a few seconds as if considering something before looking at Ninym.

"…There's one thing I'd like to ask you."

"Ask me anything."

"How do you feel about Wein's marriage, Ninym?"

"……"

This question. Ninym knew it'd come sooner or later. With the last traces of worry banished from her heart, Falanya now had enough peace of mind to consider Ninym's situation.

And if she were to comment on it at all, Falanya'd approve—no question.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that it was hard to tell what the Empire was thinking. But setting that aside for the moment, it was undeniable that a union between the princess and the prince meant Natra's relationship with the Empire would become stronger than ever and would bolster Natra itself.

But it went without saying that Falanya wasn't asking for Ninym thoughts as a lead retainer.

"I assumed he'd marry you," Falanya continued before Ninym could answer. "I mean, you're always together. You get along and care about each other… That's why I was sure that you would exchange vows with him one day. Plus, that would make you my sister-in-law, which I would love. But…"

But Wein had accepted the foreign princess's proposal to discuss tying the knot.

It was expected for a ruler to sleep with women other than his wife to ensure an heir, but it was also possible that the Imperial Princess could ban concubines and mistresses.

"…I'm honored that you would think so highly of me, Princess Falanya," Ninym started softly. "But under no circumstance would I be joined with Prince Wein in marriage. Even without this situation with the princess."

"Why not?"

"Because he is Wein Salema Arbalest, the crown prince, and I am Ninym Ralei, a Flahm."

The Flahm were a persecuted race in the West, used as slaves and detested in some regions. With Natra sharing a border with the West, it would spark outrage if the crown prince took a Flahm as his princess.

"If the prince said he would marry me, I'm afraid I'd have to slit my throat—as punishment for seducing him."

"No… Are you okay with that?"

"Yes," Ninym answered with no hesitation.

She couldn't leave any room for Falanya to hope otherwise. Ninym had replied with this resolve in mind, but it crumbled the instant she saw Falanya on the verge of tears.

"Ah. I wouldn't actually kill myself! It's a metaphor." Ninym scrambled to find the right words. "This is for your ears alone, Princess Falanya: There's a part of me that's sad I can never become his consort. But I've already been

bestowed a greater honor."

"What…?"

"—I am his heart." Ninym placed an open hand on her chest. "The prince will be married one day. And that's absolute. It may be with one, two, or perhaps even three wives. And with his beloved chosen princesses, he'll have children and love them as well."

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Ninym smiled. Somewhere along the way, her words had grown more passionate.

"But no matter the number of wives or children…he only has one heart. Just as there's one moon and one sun. And until the day his long journey comes to an end, only I may ever fill that position."

"…I don't think I get it." Falanya's brows creased in confusion.

Her reaction brought Ninym, who let out a small cough, back to her senses.

"W-well, just think of it this way: Marriage isn't the end goal for all relationships with the opposite sex. Now, let's retire to your room for the day."

Upon forcibly changing the subject, Ninym hastened her pace as she shooed Falanya along.

And so, the day of the Imperial Princess's arrival drew closer.

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In the Kingdom of Natra, the short autumn season was drawing to a close, and it was already beginning to snow. Within a month, the townspeople would become used to seeing a world of silver outside.

"All right, I'll explain one more time."

Ninym was speaking next to Wein as he stared out at the landscape slowly getting coated with snow.

"The Imperial Princess Lowellmina Earthworld. The second daughter of the late Emperor. She's the youngest of his five children: three princes and two princesses. According to official documents, she's the same age as us. On the day-to-day, she shuts herself in the palace, and she's seldom seen by others. There are more than a few vassals who've never seen her, but it's said that she's a peerless beauty who charms gentlemen whenever she makes a rare appearance at a soiree."

"She sounds more fairy than human."

"Agreed. But with several nobles enamored by her, it's clear she's no fantasy or mirage. A few of her most well-known suitors include the sons of Count Lubid and Marquis Antgadull."

"Geez, both are basically prodigal sons—stubborn and uncompromising to the point that we've even heard the rumors about them in Natra. The

princess must have her hands full dealing with those suitors… Ninym, I told you these clothes would be too stuffy."

"Bear with it. You're welcoming Imperial royalty. You have to look the part."

Wein fiddled with the collar of his formal outfit. As Ninym had said, it was all in preparation for the arrival of the Imperial Princess later that day.

"Well, as for the three princes vying for the throne…I did some digging and found she's distanced herself from the political chaos. And they're scrambling to do damage control, since this arrangement apparently caught them by surprise," she continued.

"Which means this wasn't planned by one of the sons. The proposal is getting more suspicious by the minute… Didn't any of the factions try to stop her?"

"I think they were planning on it, but the only one with the authority to stop her is the Emperor. Now that the throne is empty, there's only so much they can do."

"So nobody could stop the princess from leaving. Which brings us to today."

"They pushed to expediate this process under the pretext of reaching Natra before winter sets in, but I'm guessing her true motivation is to get here before one of the princes becomes Emperor and ends the feud. She won't be able to make decisions for herself when that happens."

"Which means this is her only shot, whatever her aim. You know, I wouldn't have guessed the Empire would be in shambles for this long…"

It'd been six months since the Emperor had passed away, and there was still no ruler to take his place, which even caught Wein by surprise—and he was a foreigner. He couldn't imagine how worried and impatient those in the Empire were feeling about this whole ordeal.

"The factions have become more hostile toward each other. And their individual provinces are divided in their chosen candidates for the throne, too."

"It's been going around that each faction is starting to stockpile weapons, right?"

"Yes. At this rate, they're en route to civil war. If one of the princes withdraws and unites with another, this would be settled in a flash, but it'd be hard for any of them to back down with the throne dangling in front of them."

“I mean, if there’s someone else who can get the job done, I’d rather have them do it.”

“You’re the only one who thinks that way, Wein.”

He shrugged his shoulders as if to say *You’ve got me there*.

“Anyway, I guess unrest in the Empire is here to stay…” Wein complained before letting out a wry chuckle.

Ninym cocked her head to the side quizzically. “What?”

“Just thinking that those guys must be having a hard time.”

“By that, you mean…”

“The three from the military academy.”

Ah. Ninym understood immediately.

Back when the duo studied in the Empire for two years, Wein had lied about his identity to enter the military academy. He’d dropped out of school right before graduation, after the Natra king had fallen ill, but unsurprisingly, he was well-liked, particularly by three people.

Their names were Glen, Strang, and Lowa.

“If all went according to their respective plans, I bet Glen is in the Imperial troops by now. And Strang must have returned to his hometown in the provinces to work as a bureaucrat…which means they both must feel uneasy about the struggle for the throne.”

“And what about Lowa?” Wein asked.

“I’d like to say she’s probably secured her position as something, since she’s as an aristocrat…but her family are low-ranking nobles from the countryside. She told me she’d return home after graduation. Out of the three, she’s the most removed from this whole ordeal.” Ninym giggled. “What if she’s tossed the turmoil aside and is fumbling around with the subject of marriage, just like you?”

“Someone coming to Lowa to ask for her hand in marriage? Point me to a guy who would want that nuisance for a wife. Any guy.”

“I mean, she *was* popular at school. She’s beautiful. Plus, she did a great job hiding her true personality. Well, no one really went near her since she was associated with us—troublemakers.”

“And now that we’re not there to shield her from the world, I’m sure guys are falling for her left and right. It’s their own fault for being a poor judge of character, but oh boy, my condolences to the guy who ends up married to her.”

Ninym sighed. “There you go, gossiping again… What if I told you I thought she and you had a lot in common?”

“Us? Seriously? How?”

“I mean, you’re both good at acting innocent. You put yourselves first and aggressively go after your goals. You get others wrapped up in your business, plus—”

“Hold it. You think I’m a cocky jerk who feigns innocence and drags people into my problems?”

“Yeah, and what of it?”

“But that’s… Oh…” Wein replayed his past actions in his head, and “… not true” was left unsaid.

A knock came at the office door, and a palace official walked in.

“Your Highness, the envoy for Her Imperial Highness has arrived.”

Wein and Ninym met each other’s gaze.

“It begins.”

“Yes. Let us set off, Your Highness.”

Accompanied by Ninym, Wein headed out of the room. Their destination? The front entrance of the palace. If they listened closely, they could hear distant chatter.

The two arrived at last. In the reception hall, an unfamiliar group was lined up in the large space. The Imperial delegation.

And standing front and center was a girl in a dress and a veil that concealed her visage.

“—Thank you for coming all this way. Welcome to the Kingdom of Natra,” greeted Wein, stepping inside the grand hall.

Everyone in the room turned in his direction.

The envoy examined him with a look of caution and appraisal. There were a handful in the audience that derided him as inexperienced. Their collective gazes were enough to pierce through Wein.

Well, any normal person would lose their composure, but he brushed off their glares as if they were nothing more than a gentle breeze. He sauntered forward until he was right in front of the girl.

“In the stead of my ill father, I offer you the warmest of greetings. I am the prince regent, Wein Salema Arbalest.”

“…I am Lowellmina Earthworld,” she responded in a dignified voice. One might call the tone silvery.

Even the officials observing them with bated breath let out an involuntary sigh of wonder.

……Hmm?

Meanwhile, Wein had a completely different reaction upon hearing her voice. There was no mistaking it was lovely. But that aside, it felt as if he'd heard it somewhere else before.

"Is something the matter, Prince Wein?"

"Ah, no. Pardon me. Your voice is so lovely that it almost captured my heart… But it feels strangely familiar. Have we met before?"

Wein was drawing on every memory, trying to think of a time when they could have met, and he came back empty. Which meant it was all a mistake, and she'd correct him…or that's what should have happened.

"—Oh my. You caught on fast."

"Huh?" he croaked out pathetically.

The princess slipped her veil up, fully revealing her face.

It was one that Wein had seen before—along with Ninym, who was standing behind him.

"It's been a while, Wein," she whispered for his ears only.

And then Lowellmina Earthworld, who was also known as Lowa Felbis, grinned at him.

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Chapter 3 | A Fated Meeting, A Predestined Reunion

"NOOOOOOOO! WHY?! WHY CAN'T I WIN?!" screamed a voice that rippled through the open classroom.

In the room were three boys and a single girl, huddling around a large desk marked with geographic symbols and pawns to represent the positions of soldiers. These pieces were intended for tabletop military exercises.

"That makes thirty-two losses out of thirty-two… I thought I had the blood of our proud troops running through my veins! But it turns out I'm a total diiiiiiiiisgrace…!" wailed one of the members—the heaviest boy out of their group of four, named Glen.

"Get a grip, Glen. You keep getting caught in the same way," spoke the twiggy boy across from him. His name was Strang. "If you can't win with force, you gotta consider other strategies. I mean, staying the course sounds good in theory, but you're just being careless, especially if your stubbornness keeps you from improving. Plus, this inflexibility will cost you the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers."

"Geez, I know! You think I can't even count the lives of my comrades? You think I'm a *beast*?"

"Well, even an animal would learn after thirty losses, which makes you worse."

Listening to their conversation, the third boy burst into laughter. Wein.

"Ha-ha-ha! He's tearing you a new one, Glen. Is your lineage just for show?"

"Damn you, Wein! I won't forgive anyone who dares insult me—much less my family!"

"Hey, hey, hey. I know you're frustrated that you're the family

disappointment, but don't take it out on me."

"Ngh… You weasel! You're having the time of your life humiliating me!"

"I'm having a blast!"

"You're asking for it, aaaaaaaasshole!"

And that began their little scuffle.

From a short distance away, Ninym looked on with a smile at their day-to-day shenanigans at the Imperial military academy.

"This can only be settled with a duel! Let's take this outside, Wein!"

"Seriously? You're asking to duke it out because you can't win a tabletop battle? And might I mention that's *your* specialty? What happened to honor? What happened to pride?"

Strang interjected. "Uh-uh. Not so fast, Wein. It's the most basic of tactics to circumvent your weaknesses and use your strengths to overcome the enemy. And 'pride' has more to do with victory than anything else."

"Oh, didn't think you'd use that argument. But if you're calling this 'strategy,' I'm not obliged to approach it head-on."

"You're right." Strang nodded before shaking his head dramatically. "Well, I can see why you'd shit your pants thinking about going up against Glen."

"What?"

"I mean, he *was* the first one to make you eat dirt, even though you scored the highest in almost every class."

"What did you just say about me?"

"I don't blame you, man. It's the most basic of tactics to steer clear of your weaknesses."

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST SAY ABOUT ME?!" Wein screeched. "What are you talking about, you little shit?! I've got no reason to be scared! Who told you that?! I could knock the hell out of Glen with one clean hit!"

"Bullshit! Your swordsmanship is so pathetic, you'll never be a match for me! Even if you practiced for one hundred years!"

"Like hell! I was reckless before, but if I go all out, I'll beat the living crap out of you!"

"Wein," called out Ninym, who'd been observing quietly until then.

"What is it? You're not gonna tell me to quit before I lose, are you?"

"Well, I wouldn't stop you for that. I'd love to see him take you down a

notch or two."

"Then what?"

"Behind you." Ninym pointed.

Along with the other two boys, Wein turned toward the door to the classroom and spotted a young girl who looked familiar.

She was a student at the academy, too, but he'd never interacted with her before. In fact, no one in that room had any connection with this girl.

"Can I help you?" Wein vocalized their thoughts.

Under their collective gaze, she answered, "I'm curious about you all. Will you let me observe you?"

Wein exchanged glances with the others.

"Watch us? I don't think you'll find us very interesting."

"That's not true at all." With lithe steps, she came to stand in front of Wein. "I can see how you lot are the troublemakers of the school. The rumors were certainly accurate. I mean, even from this exchange, I can see you're all very entertaining."

"'Entertaining,' huh." Wein's mouth twisted. "Well, anyone who thinks that as their first impression is either a rotten asshole or an idiot with a false sense of superiority. What do you think?"

In spite of this verbal assault, she flashed a smile. Her demeanor was as far from faltering as possible. "Agreed. Well, I guess I should add that I'm actually superior to you."

"…I see. You're a fun one." Wein grinned and offered his hand. "I'm Wein. A worthless commoner."

"Lowa Felbis. The insignificant daughter of a noble family in the countryside."

Wein Salema Arbalest and Lowellmina Earthworld.

And this was how two members of royalty spent time together, hiding behind their false identities.

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The banquet to welcome and entertain the envoys went off without a hitch from start to finish. It wasn't surprising, since the Kingdom of Natra and the Empire were on good terms, with compatible values.

And the purpose of the diplomatic visit was to discuss the potential union

of the crown prince and Imperial Princess. It was an auspicious occasion.

No one in attendance was in the mood to stir up any unnecessary trouble.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason this banquet was going swimmingly. As the hosts, the Kingdom staffers had put in significant effort to prevent any trivial offenses. By dipping liberally into their dwindling supply of time and money, they were meticulous in perfecting every detail—from carefully selecting those in attendance to the proper cuisine, cutlery, and tablecloths.

Of particular note were the dishes, which had been chosen based on Wein and Ninym's input.

"I must admit my surprise that we're able to enjoy Imperial cuisine in your kingdom." Princess Lowellmina smiled from her seat as the guest of honor, speaking to Wein, who was sitting directly across from her.

"I thought you might long for a taste of home after a long journey. For tonight, I imagined it might suit your palate better than our traditional fare."

"I appreciate your consideration, Prince Wein."

These genteel interactions between the two most important people in the room were one of the reasons for the relaxed mood, allowing the room to buzz with comfortable conversation among the attendees.

"Wow. I've heard the rumors, but Princess Lowellmina is absolutely lovely."

"Well, let me just say that Prince Wein is as magnanimous as I've heard from others. I am in complete admiration for his marvelous work in His Royal Majesty's stead."

"And it appears their conversation is flowing. I imagine they will make a splendid couple once they tie the knot."

"Indeed… By the way, I appreciate that you've considered our party's fatigue when preparing this feast. But I must admit I'm disappointed that I missed out on a chance to sample your traditional flavors."

"Not to worry. We thought this might be the case and prepared our local cuisine, too. I'll have them bring it out."

The party was continuing with no trouble at all—well, on the surface.

Now what do we have here? Wein thought as he spoke with Lowellmina.

He remembered something that happened before the soiree.

“ISSA TRAP! Like, a thousand peeeeeeeeercent!” whined Wein, slumped in his chair in the office, looking like the world would end at any moment. “Any possibility that we can pretend this is all a dream?!”

“Nope.”

“I kneeeeeeeew it!” With his hands clutching his skull, Wein slammed his head into his desk.

Next to him, Ninym had on a troubled expression. “To think Lowa was the Imperial Princess… I investigated the backgrounds of your friends, but I guess I fell for misinformation. That’s on me.”

After their sudden reunion, Wein had managed to keep it together to welcome the head of the delegation, Princess Lowellmina. At the moment, she was taking a quick break in the room prepared for her.

Following this was the scheduled banquet, where Wein was expected to formally welcome the princess and establish their connection.

Keyword: expected.

“An aristocrat in the countryside? Oh, come *on*! Lying when you’re a part of the most powerful family in the whole friggin’ Empire! If you’ve got blue blood, just attend school without hiding it!”

“Wein. That could be said about you, too,” Ninym interrupted with composure, but he wailed nonetheless.

“Oh, why’d things turn out like this…? All I wanted to do was marry an imperial princess and sail into the sunset to live out my lazy days…”

“That’s not necessarily out of the question yet. This doesn’t change the fact that the Imperial Princess came to Natra to discuss your hand in marriage… The only twist is that she’s Lowa.”

“Which is the biggest problem of them all!” Wein shouted. “Remember what happened after she joined our group at the military academy? We ended up in one risky situation after the next.”

“Oh, I could never forget. Mobilizing villagers to suppress bandits. Impeaching corrupt bureaucrats. Seizing smuggled goods from crooked merchants to sell off ourselves… Now that I think about it, we seriously went through some stuff.”

“Yeah, all thanks to Lowa!”

Upon joining their little clique, Lowa would find and bring every problem that had the potential for their group to intervene. At the time, he’d wondered how she managed to sniff out these situations, but in hindsight, Wein guessed

she'd collected information from all over the place by leveraging her position as a princess.

"I mean, these tasks were obviously super dangerous! But Glen and Strang always went along with her! That's why we were constantly on the verge of getting expelled."

"I remember you were the most into it."

"……" Wein averted his gaze.

Ninym clamped both hands to his cheeks so he had no choice but to meet her eyes.

"Well, like, she'd suggest things like swapping the painting of a creepy aristocrat with a counterfeit to humiliate him! Which sounds like so much fun! Like, duh! Of course, I'd be up for it!"

"And I was the one who had to suffer while cleaning up your messes. Oh, just thinking about it is getting me riled up."

"Okay, back on topic," Wein forcibly commanded. "Moving on. To Lowa, conspiring comes as naturally as breathing. There's no way that she came here *just* to talk. She's got something brewing. No question about it."

"I have no objections. And I guess this means your original hypothesis was correct." Ninym stretched out his cheeks. "Our newest piece of information is that Lowa is the princess. Other than that, the situation hasn't changed. Her motives are still up in the air. We need to do some more digging to find out what's on her mind."

"How long is the envoy staying?"

"Two weeks. That's the plan."

"Which is long enough to suggest they're definitely scheming…" Wein lamented, down in the dumps.

Ninym's profile was marked with caution. "She must have something in mind. As host, you'll be entertaining at several events. It shouldn't be difficult to make contact."

"Except finding out her true motives will be harder than boiling the ocean…"

"Well, in the near future, there's no doubt she'll be gorged on food."

"Guess I should hope that will make her loose-lipped."

Ninym shrugged. "You can't just hope for a slip of the tongue. You need to extract it out of her. It's almost time."

Wein nodded and rose to head toward the banquet hall with Ninym.

Which brings us to the next scene. Wein sat in front of Lowellmina.

Guess I've got no choice but to draw it out of her.

Based on her behavior, Lowellmina didn't seem the type to let loose in formal settings as she did at the academy. Wein had no problem with that. It enabled him to use his princely authority to corner her.

"Princess Lowellmina, may I ask if you were the one who suggested this visit?"

"Yes. You might tease me for acting in a way unbefitting of an unmarried princess, but I wished to meet you in person, Prince Wein."

"I would never. To speak to a beautiful woman is the highest honor for any man… But I'm afraid I'm the prince of a minor, remote nation. Why did you want to meet me?"

"My. You're selling yourself short," Lowellmina replied, all smiles. "After all, we've heard the news of you leading your nation in the stead of your ill father to victory against Marden. As a member of the Imperial family and as a woman, I must admit this piqued my interest."

"I worry I may disappoint you. What do you think? Have I met the expectations of the Empire?"

"Ah, yes, well… I wouldn't say you've met them exactly," she teased mischievously. "After all, you've far exceeded them."

"Well, well. You've got me." Wein tried to cover his embarrassment with a wry grin, which drew out another faint smile from Lowellmina.

"My older brothers advised me not to come, but I knew this was the right choice."

"Ah. Were you met with opposition?"

"Oh, like you wouldn't even believe. But when I heard you were searching for a princess, I couldn't help myself… To be honest, my brothers were the ones who lent me their people to act as my envoys. I told them a smaller number would have sufficed, but they insisted it was dangerous. Wouldn't you agree that they're being overprotective?"

Wein replied as if troubled. "As an older brother myself, I'm afraid I must side with the imperial princes."

"Ah, yes, you have a younger sister."

“My pride and joy. I shall introduce you two as early as tomorrow.”

In the back of his mind, Wein ruminated on Lowellmina’s words.

Everything could be attributed to her recklessness, if this matter was analyzed in a straightforward manner. In the throes of puberty, Lowellmina had been wooed by a foreign prince and forcibly invited herself to his castle, traveling abroad with her delegation.

—At least, that’s the cover story she used to get her way.

Of course, Wein didn’t believe her story for a millisecond.

Except for one thing. It was extremely likely that her envoys were the subordinates of her brothers, seeing that she wouldn’t have had enough people reporting to her directly. Even though she was imperial royalty, she was still a young girl and the youngest of five, after all.

If she’s intentionally offering me this information, that could only mean…

Their conversation continued as the gears turned in his head.

“That said, Natra is far colder in the winter than I’d expected.”

“It must come as quite a shock. After all, our steep mountains and harsh weather are all we have that the Empire lacks. Well, we’re still at the beginning of winter.”

“It gets colder than this?”

“In the middle of winter, windblown trees often freeze solid in the snow. That’s winter in Natra for you.”

This was enough for a troubled look to wash over her face, triggering a new idea in Wein’s mind.

“Aha! If it interests you, I can send you our traditional garb. I know imperial attire is sturdy and beautifully designed, but it may not offer you respite from the weather in Natra.”

“I appreciate your kindness. You’re correct in observing that our clothing hasn’t been enough to keep out the wind—to our dismay.”

With that, Lowellmina gave a playful wink. “And am I right to assume you’ll choose something that’ll look good on me?”

“Oh dear. As a man, I can’t refuse this request. It appears I must go all out.”

“Hee-hee-hee. I look forward to it.”

After that, the pair continued to talk of inconsequential subjects until it was time for Wein to give his closing remarks. When he brought the banquet to an end, it was already late in the evening.

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To welcome a foreign guest of honor, the exclusive suite set aside for Lowellmina was prepared to a degree of perfection that even the Imperial Princess could appreciate.

It wasn't showy or resplendent, but it was spotless from corner to corner. On the walls hung tasteful pieces of antique art. Through the window, the starlight softly illuminated the room as if in a dream, and just outside, the light of scattered bonfires flickered in the dark night.

She imagined her time in this room would be quiet but comfortable. Just as Lowellmina came to this conclusion, a knock sounded at the door.

When she granted entry, an attendant entered the room.

"I apologize for interrupting your rest, Princess Lowellmina. A gift from Prince Wein," the attendant explained, signaling the trunks outside the door.

Each was large enough for a person to fit inside. Three in total.

"We've done a thorough investigation. They contain clothes."

"Oh, I didn't think they would arrive this quickly. Please bring them inside."

"Understood." The attendant called for a few other servants to complete her request. "Would you like to try a few of them on?"

"No, I'll do that tomorrow. Please leave me for now."

"Of course."

After shooing everyone out of the room, Lowellmina was alone once again—but she didn't shut her mouth, speaking to the trunks of clothing.

"—All right, you can come out now."

The trunk lurched and lifted the lid of its own accord.

"Phew." A boy inhaled sharply, shoving layers of clothing aside to emerge out of the box.

It was Wein.

"Dang it! I wanted to prank her. How'd she find out?"

Another lid creaked open to reveal Ninym. "Of course she would. It's so obvious."

"Maybe next time, I'll use a rope to break and enter through the window."

"Great, and I'll be in charge of sawing the rope in two."

"Um, Miss Ninym? Why so bloodthirsty?"

Listening to their lively exchange, Lowellmina chuckled, joining in on their conversation. “Hee-hee-hee. It’s like you two are back at the academy.”

“Can you believe this, Ninym? The Imperial Princess is laughing at us.”

“By clowning around, at that. In my humble opinion, that’s a small price to pay.”

“Good point.”

Lowellmina burst into laughter, and when she finally caught her breath, she looked at Ninym.

“I had a chance to greet Wein earlier, but not you. It’s been a while, Ninym. I’m glad to see you’re still by his side.”

“And I am pleased to see you in good health, Lowa. Or would you prefer Princess Lowellmina?”

“Oh, don’t get all formal with me. We’re good friends.” Lowellmina took both of Ninym’s hands in hers. “Just call me Lowa.”

“All right. When we’re in private.”

Lowellmina nodded and took the pair in. “You haven’t changed at all.”

“Oh, we have. For example, I’ve gotten taller and waaaaay more handsome, and Ninym has gotten bigger everywhere other than her boobs… Wait, Ninym! Put that fist down! It was just a playful jab.”

“Which means it’s time for me to throw my straight punch, right?”

“…Lowa, help!”

“Hmm? Erm… Hey, Wein, do *I* look any different?”

“Your butt got bigger, I think.”

“Ninym, give him all you’ve got.”

“Got it.”

“What?! Don’t tell me my silver tongue is ineffective!”

Just as Wein found himself in a real bind, the door to the room clicked open timidly.

“Princess Lowellmina? I heard a voice and—*what?!*”

It was the attendant who’d delivered the trunks of clothes, eyes wide in surprise upon catching a glimpse at Wein and Ninym. Their faces were just as shocked.

“Ambassador Blundell?”

Standing on the other side of the door was Fyshe Blundell, the former ambassador who’d been stationed in Natra and dismissed after losing in a battle of wits against Wein. There was no questioning her identity.

“Excellent timing, Fyshe. Please stand guard outside. If anyone comes, tell them I’ve retired for the evening.”

“Yes, ah, no, but the Prince…”

“Fyshe,” Lowellmina warned, flashing her steely gaze on the confused attendant.

She swallowed her response and bowed with reverence. “…Understood. I’ll be right outside the door. Please call if you need anything.”

“I’m counting on you.”

When Fyshe slipped back through the door, Lowellmina looked at Wein.

“Surprised?”

“Yeah.” Wein nodded. “But it all makes sense now. I was wondering how Ambassador Talem managed to broach the subject of marriage with the Imperial Princess, but now I get it. It was all through Ambassador Blundell… his predecessor.”

“That’s right. She switched from the diplomatic corps to serving at my side. Thanks to a certain someone, she’d been forced to work a menial job, and I managed to talk her into becoming my attendant.”

“Feel free to thank me at any time.”

“I’ll forget your insolence from earlier.”

“Yay.”

“But I won’t,” Ninym chirped.

“Nooo.”

Her fist sunk into his cheek.

“Well, let’s sit down before we continue our chat.”

“Yes, let’s. Ninym?”

Ninym responded to the call by making her way to the unopened third trunk, popping it open to dig inside to fetch wine and a set of glasses.

“You’re prepared. Who’s it made by?” Lowellmina asked.

“Remember when we swapped out a bottle of wine when we were switching the paintings of that aristocrat? It’s the very same bottle.”

“…Didn’t you tell me it was broken in transport?”

“If we break it tonight after we polish it off, there won’t be a difference.”

“…You really haven’t changed.”

The three sat around the table, pouring wine into glasses placed in front of each person.

“A toast,” Wein suggested.

“For what?”
Wein grinned. “To our reunion, of course.”
His sonorous voice reverberated across the room.

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“Hard to believe you’re the Imperial Princess, Lowa,” Wein started, attempting to get the ball rolling. “Did you know about me and Ninym from the very beginning?”

“Of course.” Lowellmina nodded. “I mean, you were pretending to be commoners, but it’s not as if you went to great lengths to hide your true identities.”

“Eh, I was officially studying abroad in the Empire as the crown prince, so I guess it’d be obvious if you tracked my movements. Plus, I used my real name, since it would be a pain in the ass to change it.”

In the first place, all records of their enrollment were supposed to have been wiped from the face of the earth upon their return to Natra. Wein had no idea what happened after they left.

“I was more concerned that you’d find me out. Especially because your network of spies in the Empire is expansive.”

Ninym groaned, vexed that she’d been unable to expose the identity of the girl who was close to her master.

“To tell you the truth, I would have confided in you if you were upfront with me. That’s why I asked Ninym if you were actually commoners once.”

“I remember that.”

“Right. And you said yes.” Lowellmina faced her. “—Ninym Ralei. Why would you lie to your dear friend?”

For a second, her glare was dreadful enough to make blood curdle. *Off with your head if you dare give me an excuse*, it silently expressed.

But Ninym was unfazed. “Why, I didn’t lie at all.”

As the one working at the side of the crown prince, she was familiar with being on the receiving end of pressure.

“It was just a mistake,” Ninym declared with pride. “If we’re friends, you’ll forgive me, right? Your Imperial Highness, Princess Lowellmina Earthworld.”

They stared each other down for a few more seconds before Lowellmina broke into a wide smile.

“Of course, Ninym. Oh, I love that about you. May I give you a hug?”

“You always try to pick fights with potential playmates. I think you really

ought to do something about that… Hey. Don't hug me before I've given my consent."

"It's part of my personality." Lowellmina squeezed Ninym with all her might.

Wein shrugged as he watched the duo. "Talk about a royal pain in the ass."

You're one to talk, Ninym communicated via glare, which he pretended affected him less than a gentle breeze.

"Right. I haven't expressed my appreciation to you. For figuring out my intentions and responding appropriately."

"Oh, you mean at the banquet."

They were referring to Lowellmina telling Wein at the soiree that the envoys belonged to her brothers. It had been code for *My brothers' eyes are everywhere*, meaning it would be difficult to meet behind closed doors unless he was proactive.

When Wein realized this, he'd prepared trunks with secret openings and snuck into Lowellmina's room with Ninym.

"No thanks needed. But now that you've called us here, you have to be honest with us. Tell me the real reason why you came all the way to Natra under the guise of a potential union."

"Yes, of course." Lowellmina nodded.

"Wein, let me be frank in my proposal. Do you want to steal the Empire with me?"

Silence fell on them.

The trio exchanged glances, which tangled together in an intricate web and sprayed sparks through the still air.

Wein was the one who finally spoke up. "Lowa, are you suggesting we oust the three princes and put you on the throne?"

"Precisely."

"…Geez, you're asking for the impossible."

"Am I?" Lowellmina feigned ignorance.

Wein turned to look at her and shook his head. "I'm assuming you know the amount of power that we possess as a nation. You can search high and

low, but you'll never find enough strength for us to go against the Empire."

"Sure. If the Empire unleashed its full might, it could erase this kingdom from the face of the continent. But," Lowellmina continued, "that's a big 'if.' I'm sure you've heard of our internal state. With this battle between brothers for the throne, the Empire cannot function at its full capacity."

"…" Wein didn't reply, but his face said he knew this to be true.

"Allow me to recount the events leading up to this moment. I'll start from the very beginning. The catalyst for this situation was our late father becoming ill. That's the Earthworld Emperor," Lowellmina started. "His condition was serious enough to cloud his consciousness and left him unable to stand or speak. Performing his administrative duties was out of the question, which meant it was only reasonable to find a representative to act in his stead. But the Emperor had yet to announce a successor, and the palace fell into complete chaos."

It was here that Ninym chimed in.

"…This has bothered me for some time. Why didn't he name a successor? I've heard a number of rumors, but I can't tell which one is true."

"Hmm, I've never asked him directly, so I can only speculate. This should be taken with a grain of salt, but…I wonder if it has something to do with the events leading up to his ascent to the throne."

Ninym tilted her head quizzically. "And that would be…?"

"He had many brothers, which placed him far down the line of succession. But he couldn't give up on his aspirations for the throne. Only when he demonstrated his abilities was he recognized as a worthy heir. He always said adversity makes or breaks you."

Wein snorted. "I see. The point is that he never forgot his own struggles, and he pushed his sons to follow his path."

"That's about the gist of it." Lowellmina gave a wry smile. "I honestly think he meant to make the eldest son his successor in his heart. But my oldest brother would rest on his laurels, refusing to pull himself together, no matter how many times he was admonished. Because of that, he may have refrained from stating his decision in order to try and rouse his firstborn son to action."

"But he was conked out by the illness before that could happen."

"Right. It would have been a different story if my oldest brother had realized the errors of his ways, unified the palace, and put the other two in

their place. But in reality, the younger pair seized the opportunity to secretly chip away at his political authority while the eldest became overwhelmed by his duties. Controlling the palace took a backseat for him."

"But the Emperor gained consciousness once more after that, right?" Ninym commented.

Lowellmina nodded. Even Natra had received word that the Emperor had recovered.

"The whole palace let out a sigh of relief when they heard the news. Of course, they were comforted by his improving health, but they hoped it might bring a conclusion to the fight over the throne. He actually called for all his children, me included."

Lowellmina shook her head.

"But all that awaited us was a scolding. He expressed his disappointment in his eldest son for failing to unite the palace and in the two others for not managing to oust their brother. He announced that he would be returning to his official duties and that no one was worthy of becoming his successor."

Ninym sighed. "How foolish. He had a chance to name an heir and put an end to this mess, but he allowed his emotions to get the better of him. And then he passed away, inviting them to continue their fight… My sympathies to the subjects of the Empire."

Wein shrugged. "I can see why he might have felt that way. I mean, a strong leader is indispensable, especially to an empire facing rapid expansion. If these brothers of yours are overwhelmed by the troubles in their own palace, it'd be hard to rely on them to deal with foreign relations… Personally, I think you all should shove any old person on the throne at this point."

"Agreed." Lowellmina raised her hand. "And I think I should take that very seat, which brings us full circle. Will you help me out?"

"……Ninym."

"There's no mention in Imperial law that the daughter of an Emperor cannot take the throne. She has every right to inherit it. That said, all the successors have been male until this point, and there is a belief among the Empire's people that this tradition should continue on."

"I know no one of influence within the Empire that will support me. Everyone is courting one of my three brothers—and taking no notice of me. That's why I had to call upon old friends. Don't you think this will be

entertaining?"

"Totally."

"WEEEEEEEEEEEEEEIN," warned Ninym in a shrill voice, her glare boring into Wein as he nodded eagerly.

"I know, I know. Back at the academy, I could participate in this ordeal, but I'm the crown prince of Natra. Based on that alone, I can't agree to this proposal."

"Are you saying no? You could be the husband of a future Empress, you know."

"Ha-ha-ha, that's some punishmentOW!" Wein rubbed at his bruised shin.

Lowellmina watched him from her periphery. "Well, I never assumed you would agree from the outset. Anyway, we've talked enough. Shall we call it a night?"

"Meaning you've got more tricks up your sleeve to get me to join you."

"Naturally. I'm not so eccentric that I would travel all the way to the northernmost point of the continent empty-handed."

Wein grinned. "Nice. Looking forward to tomorrow, Lowa."

Lowellmina flashed a composed smile. "Prepare to be wowed."

Ninym sighed. "I knew you two were one and the same…"

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How long had it been since this clandestine meeting in the room began?

Fyshe Blundell fidgeted as she kept guard outside the door, unable to relax.

She'd heard Lowellmina had been friends with Wein and Ninym at the academy and allegedly they'd been close with one another. But that was back in their school days. Now, they each had a separate position to fulfill, which meant their friendship wouldn't necessarily hold up. Plus, they were two people of the opposite sex and of marrying age, which doubled her concerns.

Fly in the moment there's an emergency… Fyshe kept telling herself.

She had originally been a diplomat, of course, meaning she honestly had no knowledge of the martial arts. As Lowellmina's attendant, she tried to learn basic forms of self-defense, but the only thing that came from that was Fyshe realizing the shortcomings of her own athleticism.

Her chest was especially a problem. In her diplomat days, her ample

assets could be weaponized, but now, they swayed too much when she moved around, making them painfully sensitive. They always got in the way.

Won't they do me a solid and get a little smaller? she complained internally.

The aide beyond the door would have clicked her tongue in annoyance if she could hear Fyshe's thoughts.

The ex-ambassador suddenly felt the door open behind her and whipped around to see Wein and Ninym leave the room with Lowellmina seeing them off.

"A productive evening, Princess."

"I had a splendid time."

Wein courteously took Lowellmina's hand. "I would speak with you longer if I could. Alas, it's time for even the stars to make their way to bed. I take my leave."

"I look forward to tomorrow and hope no one questions you on your return. Take care."

"No need to worry. There is no one more knowledgeable of the layout of this palace." Wein let go of Lowellmina's hand and glanced at Fyshe. "See you around, Lady Blundell."

"Ah… Y-yes." Fyshe gave a flustered bow.

She may have been the ambassador before, but she was nothing more than a simple attendant now, meaning she was in no position to expect the crown prince to address her directly. But that was Wein—generosity and all.

And with Ninym by his side, Wein took his leave.

Lowellmina called out to her attendant, who watched the pair leave. "Fyshe, any issues during our meeting?"

"No, none at all."

"I see. Well then, come on in."

"Yes." Fyshe surveilled the area once more just to be safe before setting foot in the room. "How did the proceedings go, Your Imperial Highness?"

"Just splendid," Lowellmina replied. "All according to our scheme. I told him my plan was to take the throne."

"Wonderful. In that case…"

"We'll follow through with our little plan and continue our discussions… All to fulfill my true motive."

A look of anxiety spread across Fyshe's profile. After all, she knew the

weight of the princess's actual intentions.

"…Will Prince Wein find out?" she asked.

Though she'd framed it as a question, Fyshe already knew the answer, even before hearing Lowellmina's reply.

And the princess had come to the same conclusion.

Lowellmina flashed a composed smile.

"—It's all a bluff," Wein drawled as he sauntered through the empty palace hallway.

Lowellmina had come under the guise of discussing a potential union with Wein.

Her true motive was apparently to get Wein to help her take the throne.

Which was also a lie. He could tell there was a hidden third intention she was keeping from them.

"And your proof?" asked Ninym, walking beside him, unfazed because she'd sensed the same thing.

"It's impossible that she has no supporters in the Empire. I mean, she's an unmarried Imperial Princess, for crying out loud. And she has a legitimate claim to the throne. There's gotta be hordes of people taking advantage of the chaos to butter her up."

"Well, maybe she can't find anyone useful. Anyone wanting to make it big would have sided with one of the princes."

"And the first place that she went to find backing was Natra? Please. There's no point to that. We're eons away from catching up to the Empire—militarily *and* politically."

It wasn't unusual for trouble to arise over who would become the next ruler. If a civil conversation wasn't enough to resolve a succession crisis, the next logical step was to use military force.

But Natra wasn't anything more than an ally to the Empire. It had no power to intervene in its internal politics. They could push for Lowellmina, but it'd be difficult for them to make any headway.

On the other hand, forcibly silencing the three princes was just as unreasonable. There was an obvious difference in strength between Natra and Earthworld. Even if the princes split the power of the Empire into three, Wein

knew he'd never stand a chance.

There was no way Lowa wouldn't have realized this.

"In that case, it's an even bigger mystery why she'd pay us a visit."

"Yeah. But I found a few leads during our chat." Wein grinned. "Leave it to me. I'll expose everything."

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“What do you think of the Empire?”

A scene back in the military academy.

They were hanging out in the corner of a classroom, doing nothing at all, when Lowa had suddenly asked this question of the four of them out of the blue.

“What do we think?” Glen repeated after the four exchanged glances, getting the ball rolling. “I’m proud, of course. Earthworld is glorious. As a soldier, it’s an honor to devote myself to my country!”

“Except you haven’t been enlisted yet,” Wein butted in.

“Ngh.” Glen groaned. “Well, yeah, but if my grades are any indication…”

“You mean in all the classes that I beat you in—other than martial arts? Those grades?”

“…AaaaaaaAAAAAARGH!”

“Whooooa?! You cheater! You can’t just throw a punch out of nowhere?!”

“Shut it! I’m gonna end you!”

Wein and Glen started to grapple with each other, clambering over desks and chairs, as Lowa turned to Strang. “What do you think?”

“You’re asking someone from the provinces?” Strang asked back with a bitter smile.

The provinces were nations that had lost to the Empire, becoming shadows of their former glory. It was easy to see why someone from these areas might have complicated feelings about their conqueror.

“…To answer your question, I think it’s impressive. You know, seizing land and integrating people and cultures into their own. They became the

rulers of the eastern half of the continent in the blink of an eye. That's no easy feat."

"Well, that's what the losers have to say—otherwise, they'd have to admit their own faults," Wein added.

"Why can't you just shut your trap?!"

"It's my mission to provoke others at every opportunity."

"Give up your delusional little goal!"

Lowa giggled at this volley between Wein and Strang before turning to Ninym. "What about you?"

"Well…as a Flahm, I think it's easier to exist here."

The Empire was home to a wide array of ethnicities. As a meritocracy, there was relatively less discrimination here. Even those in the provinces or people facing oppression in the West could succeed on the basis of their skills and accomplishments.

"Right, I've heard prejudice against the Flahm is bad in the West."

"Who needs those guys? The Empire could beat the bias straight outta them," Glen proclaimed before looking at Wein. "…Hey, why aren't you being a prick to Ninym?"

"What? Provoking others? That's the worst. Why would I ever do such a thing, Glen?"

"You're seriously…!" Glen shouted.

"Obvious nepotism," Strang remarked.

Lowa took a sidelong glance at Glen reacting indignantly and Strang smirking wryly before posing the question to the final member.

"And what do you think about the Empire, Wein?"

"Fit for use," he answered frankly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing more. I don't love it or hate it, but there are ways that it can serve me. That's all." Wein shrugged. "I mean, the relationship between a citizen and country shouldn't be a bad deal. If they're in disagreement, the citizen is free to move elsewhere. I think patriotism and national devotion are huge pains in the ass."

"Nghhh…"

"How very Wein of you."

"Well, I'm impressed that the Empire lets me think this way," Wein admitted, turning toward Lowa. "But more importantly, what do *you* think of

the Empire?"

"Me? I love it, of course," she replied, leaving no room for debate. "I was born and raised here. But I guess that's why I'm frustrated by some aspects of it."

"Oh? For example?"

"Well…" Lowa adopted a mischievous tone. "Like the fact that you haven't been arrested yet, Wein."

"Agreed. One hundred percent."

"Can't argue with that."

"I think a little adversity would do him some good."

"Hey! You guys are the worst! You know that, right?!"

Lowa giggled as she observed her friends fly into an uproar, smoldering a passionate fury deep within her that nobody could see.

◆◇◆

"I have no idea…"

It had been some time since the Imperial envoys arrived in Natra.

Wein was in his office alone, clawing at his head.

"I can't figure out what's going on in that noggin of hers… Seriously. What did Lowa come here for…?"

Ever since their secret meeting, he'd observed her every move in search of a motive. And since Wein was the only one entertaining her, there were plenty of opportunities to keep an eye on her.

But he couldn't find anything. He knew she was touring Natra under the pretext of enriching herself, but he caught no suspicious activity whatsoever. She appeared to be actually sightseeing.

"But I know she's up to something…" Wein crossed his arms, hemming and hawing, when a knock came at the office door.

"May I come in?" His little sister Falanya appeared in the doorway.

Wein quickly straightened up and beamed. "Oh, it's you, Falanya. How did the meeting go?"

"I'm super tired… And to think you sit through them every day." Falanya let out a long, exhausted sigh, sounding as if she were deflating.

As per their earlier discussion, Falanya had been entrusted with a handful of his usual duties while Wein was busy dealing with the Imperial envoys.

Attending this meeting was one of them.

"Give it time, and you'll get used to them. When I first started, my shoulders would always get stiff," Wein consoled, running his fingers through her hair once she'd made her way over to him.

Falanya began to close her eyes.

"Once they return home, everything will go back to normal. Bear with me. I'll try to keep your responsibilities to a minimum," he assured her.

She pouted. "Am I really that unreliable?"

Wein blinked back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that… You're doing great, Falanya. I'm going to have to ask you for more of your help when the opportunity arises. Is that okay?"

Falanya broke into a smile. "Of course. Leave it to me, Wein." She gave him a big squeeze.

"Nothing makes a big brother happier than watching his sister grow up," he added, stroking her hair.

Falanya spoke with more fervor. "I'll have to work hard to catch up to you."

"Ha-ha, there's no rush. I'll talk to Ninym and see how we can increase your workload little by little."

She nodded before realizing something. "By the way, Wein, where is she?"

"Hmm? Oh, Ninym is—"

In the Kingdom of Natra, even commoners soaked in baths.

It wasn't that they were particularly fussy or neat. Given the harsh climate, it was common knowledge that warm water could help beat back the cold. Moreover, Natra was a country blessed with an abundant source of water that allowed for liberal use. In select locations, there were hot springs that gushed out of the ground—though not enough to make them a famous vacation destination or anything.

Public bathhouses were a staple in larger towns. In the dead of winter, relaxing in their warm tubs was considered the height of pleasure for the citizens of this kingdom.

Naturally, this was no different for the upper class.

"…It's as splendid as the first time."

Here in the palace lay one of the bathhouses built to serve the elite. It had the capacity for a few dozen, but it was currently reserved for one person's private use ever since the arrival of the Imperial envoys. And that was none other than Princess Lowellmina, who was soaking in the bath at this very moment.

"The water feels warmer than the baths in the Empire. It must be because it's so cold outside."

"I'm delighted that it pleases you, Your Imperial Highness," replied Ninym in a voice tinged with concern. "But…"

"What's the matter?"

"…Why must I accompany you?"

Ninym was currently undressed in the tub alongside Lowellmina. She'd been invited by the princess, meaning she couldn't possibly refuse, but it was unprecedented for a foreign retainer to bathe with royalty.

"But didn't we do this all the time at the academy?"

"Our social standings are different now."

"Let's just say we tossed those aside along with our clothes."

Don't be ridiculous, Ninym warned with her expression.

Lowellmina continued to spew more nonsense. "Which means you can be more informal with me."

"……" Ninym's cheek twitched as she turned to the side.

"Um, Your Imperial Highness," rang out a demure voice from her line of sight. "If you wish to rekindle your friendship, I believe I should take my leave…" suggested Lowellmina's attendant, Fyshe Blundell.

She'd stripped bare to enter the bath, exposing her generous chest from the confines of her clothing without any shame.

"Fyshe, wouldn't that leave me all alone with a foreigner? What if something happened?"

"You've already locked yourself away in secret meetings with them on multiple occasions."

"And suddenly, I can't remember."

"What about your remarks about disregarding social status?"

"How about we focus on the future instead?"

""……"" Ninym and Fyshe exchanged glances upon hearing her be all nonchalant, empathizing with each other's burdens.

"…Just this once. How does that sound?" Ninym asked the attendant before her.

"I don't see why not."

Fyshe held out her hand, which Ninym took. For just this moment, the two had overcome borders to become friends.

"Are you leaving me out? You're gonna make me cry."

"Stop it. This is no laughing matter."

"Then let's talk. Fyshe, would you like to begin?"

"Yes… This may not be a sophisticated topic, but…I've heard of your time as classmates at the military academy. How did you spend your time together?"

Ninym and Lowellmina looked at each other.

"Let's see. There were two others besides me, Ninym, and Wein. Glen and Strang. The five of us were always together. The popular kids at school."

"You mean troublemakers. They overlooked our shenanigans, thanks to our grades."

"I can't deny there's some truth to that. But it's no question we were popular. Especially Ninym. After the whole situation with that duel, even the girls had respect for her."

"A duel…?" Fyshe blinked back.

Ninym sighed next to her. "Someone insulted me for being a Flahm. I challenged them to a duel and gave them a good thrashing. That's all."

"As if. There were many gentlemen charmed by your dignity. I know there was a heap of love letters you had to reject by hand. Isn't that right?"

Ninym assumed a bitter expression, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle.

"Is this how it's gonna be? I could say the same for you, Lowa. We've heard of the stream of nobles courting you, even in Natra. I think I remember hearing Antgadull and Lubid just won't give up."

"…To tell you the truth, those two have plagued me." Lowellmina sighed. "I gave them a few pointers when they were struggling to remember proper etiquette at a soiree—and that launched a rush of letters and presents… And all in awful taste…"

"That's rare for you to say, Lowa."

"Would you like me to show you one of the letters? On the surface, each insists they have all the qualities necessary to be the perfect consort to an

Imperial princess. Which means they only see me as a crown jewel to adorn themselves. Throw in an awful taste in cheap jewelry, and I'm sure you'd feel the same if you saw it firsthand."

"You have my…deepest condolences."

Lowellmina began to whisper as if in prayer. "I hope this visit will encourage them to give up on me."

To that, Fyshe shook her head, almost cruelly. "They're the tenacious type in my opinion, and this may ignite their passion."

"You heard her, Lowa."

"…Fyshe, recount every single detail of your romantic encounters. Spit it out. Now," Lowa teased Fyshe, who'd planted her foot firmly in her own mouth.

They continued to chat for a long while afterward.

"—And that's why Ninym is in the middle of taking a bath with Lowellmina."

"Hrm." Falanya growled like a small animal. "No fair! I haven't even been able to take a bath with Ninym lately…!"

From Falanya's side of things, the Imperial Princess had already attempted to steal her brother away, which meant she didn't have a favorable opinion of Lowellmina from the start. The Imperial Princess had some nerve trying to take Ninym away from her, too!

Falanya vowed she would never forgive Lowellmina until she apologized.

"No need to pout," Wein assured, poking her cheeks. "I'll tell her to make some time for you."

"Really? The three of us can take a bath together."

"Me too? Hmm… I think we're too old for that."

"It'll be fine. I don't mind at all."

"Okay, okay, I'll think about it," Wein placated with the slyness of a politician—a promise to consider a request with zero intent to follow through.

He quickly changed the subject. "By the way, Falanya, how are your studies coming along? Making any progress?"

"Ack."

Her reaction was more than enough for Wein to grasp the situation.

He chuckled. “No worries. Claudius might not forgive his students for horsing around, but he’s patient with those who need a little more help. If you want to learn, you will.”

“But I’ve been distracted by other things lately, and I haven’t been paying attention to my lessons. I’m think he’s still cross with me,” she admitted apologetically.

Wein patted her head. “Don’t worry. He would have died in a fit of rage while teaching me if there was any chance that could be true. Let’s see… To make up for lost time, do you want to have a remedial lesson? I think I can carve out some time to teach my one and only sister.”

Her eyes widened with surprise—and then with glee. “I’d love that.”

“All righty. What have you been learning from Claudius?”

“Um, about the Empire. It kept getting bigger and bigger, conquering a bunch of countries. And there were a few stand-out nations.”

“Got it. Burnoch, Codlafy, Todrelan… Each country has a story of their downfall, but I guess we don’t have time to cover everything. In that case… Let’s go with Antgadull.”

Wein took the feather quill on his desk and a piece of scrap paper from a stack of documents. He began to draw in the margins, creating a map of the eastern continent.

“Our Kingdom of Natra is positioned in the center of the continent at its northernmost tip. To the West, we have Marden, which is now a defunct country. To the East, we have the Gairan State, aka Imperial territory. Falanya, do you know what their specialty is?”

“Textiles. I’ve heard the quality is very good.”

“Especially those that have been ‘mirror-dyed,’ which produces a mysteriously glossy finish. They’ve been regularly used by successive generations of Earthworld Emperors. It’s rare to find them on the market.

“If only they would offer them wholesale to Natra,” Wein grumbled to himself. “The Gairan State was originally called the Kingdom of Antgadull. The Empire annexed it shortly before we were born…but the events leading up to their fall earned its king the reputation of the biggest poseur on the continent.”

“What do you mean?”

“At the time, the Empire had just defeated the nations in the south,

Burnoch and Codlafy. They were hungry to make rapid progress, but we all tend to bash those who are different from us. The remaining nations in the East began to feel the heat. There was a big chance they could unite to topple this threat. That was how the anti-Empire alliance was formed."

Wein wrote a list of nations in the alliance on the map. Among them was Antgadull. By blocking out Imperial territories in black, it was clear just how many nations in the East had joined hands to fight against them.

"The alliance cornered the Empire, annexing their conquered territories. If this had continued, the Empire might not have existed today." Wein continued. "But the situation changed when the king of Antgadull declared vassalage to the Empire."

"What? He made himself a vassal? Of his own will?"

"Yeah. Look at the map. Antgadull is in the northeastern part of the continent and the Empire is at the southeast. They're as small as us, but the anti-Empire alliance had been stabbed in the back. Falanya, what do you think the group should have done?" Wein asked as he marked Antgadull in black.

Falanya thought for a moment. "I think they should focus on Antgadull and try to topple them."

"That would be ideal. But their king prevented that from happening. He bought time by tripping up the alliance with his negotiation skills. Meanwhile, the Empire pincered them, crushing every nation in the group."

The map was colored black. There were barely any white spaces left at all.

"In the end, the alliance collapsed, securing Imperial hegemony in the East. The defeated royal families were either stripped of their titles and banished from their kingdoms or executed…except for the king of Antgadull. He was bestowed the title of marquis and given control of his own colony. This is why he's called a charlatan," Wein concluded.

Falanya exhaled. "To betray the alliance and give up his kingship… Why would he do such a thing?"

"Even if the alliance won, it would have simply resulted in an era of rivaling warlords. Antgadull knew it would be crushed sooner or later. In his memoirs, the king writes that he thought it would be better to let the Empire win and secure a place among them."

But Wein knew that didn't mean it was the only reason.

"A memoir? I didn't know there was one."

“He wrote it in his later years—a rare tome with only thirty copies. I have one in my library. You’re free to read it.”

Falanya nodded, then cocked her head. “…Wait, what do you mean by ‘later years’?”

“The king has already passed away. He was already well on in his years before he became a vassal, and his boy is the second marquis. Well, ‘boy’ in air quotes. He has children older than us.”

“And is he just as great?”

“I don’t have any firsthand experience with him, but I’ve heard certain things. Vulgar. Despotic. Known to shirk his duties. Lacking in appreciation of the arts. Not even knowledgeable in military affairs. All he’s inherited from his father are looks and ambition—not courage or wisdom.”

Falanya adopted a complex expression.

“He’s famous for not getting along with the governor-general of the Gairan State,” he went on. “One is the marquis who owns half the state, the other a governor-general sent by the central government with the authority to act as magistrate. I guess it’s only natural that would cause them to butt heads __”

A knock came at the office door.

“Pardon me—Ah, Princess Falanya. You’re here, too.”

“Oh, Ninym.” Falanya trotted up to Ninym as soon as she saw her enter the room. “I heard from Wein. He said you were bathing with the Imperial Princess.”

“I was relieved of my duties a moment ago… Why do you appear displeased?”

Wein laughed. “Our little sister is angry that someone took away her big sis.”

“I see… I’ll make sure to carve out time for us to visit the bathhouse together, Princess Falanya.”

“Really? Promise me, Ninym.”

“Of course.”

They concluded their conversation on friendly terms.

Wein spoke up. “By the way, where is Princess Lowellmina?”

“She has retired to her room.”

“Any intel?”

“I’ll report everything in detail later, but there isn’t a solid lead,

unfortunately…”

“Hmm.” Wein crossed his arms.

He wanted to figure out Lowellmina’s motives—and fast, but this was going to be tough.

“Hey, listen to this, Ninym. Wein just told me the story of how Antgadull became an Imperial vassal.”

“That’s great. I imagine His Royal Highness must have spoken with great fervor. He’s always thought King Antgadull was the gold standard among monarchs.”

“Is that true? Hey, Wein.”

“Hmm? Yeah. But that’s just my opinion.”

The turncoat king had seen through the changing times and found the right time to sell out to a superpower at the highest possible price. King Antgadull had pulled off the perfect act of treason Wein dreamed of committing.

When Wein had learned this backstory, he’d initially cursed at himself like, *Dammit, he pulled it off!* But this fit of jealousy didn’t prevent him from realizing his goal wasn’t unprecedented. He’d used every means to find out as much as he could about King Antgadull and anything related to him. He even went to great lengths to acquire his memoir. That was how he knew so much about the current marquis.

“The countries in the alliance detested him, but there was no questioning his skill. If there’s anything to be learned here, it’s that personal history is inconsequential.”

“As expected of you.” Falanya gazed upon him with unbridled respect. “It would have been nice if the current marquis could be like you. If his father was so great, it’s a shame he can’t continue his legacy.”

“Did you learn about the current marquis?” Ninym asked with a wry smile. “It’s unusual for greatness to be passed down to the next generation. Particularly for royals. Travel the continent and you’ll encounter hordes of royalty who have stepped away from their thrones. Even Marquis Antgadull was once meant to be king of his own nation. There are rumors that he’s unsatisfied with his role as a vassal.”

And there was a certain someone on the verge of giving up his crown right next to them.

Antgadull, huh… Something was flickering in the back of Wein’s mind as

he replayed his lesson with Falanya. *I get the feeling that we'd get along well. Maybe. Or maybe not…*

Hrmm, Wein groaned mentally.

It felt as if the answers he sought were within arm's reach, but he couldn't quite make them out through the fog. He tried to connect scraps of information in his mind, but they just wouldn't come together in a way that made sense.

There wasn't enough information. He was missing something. If only he had it. If only something would happen—

—No, no, no! He'd almost wished for something stupid.

He already had his hands full hosting the envoys. There was absolutely no reason why he should be hoping for something to happen on top of that.

That's right. It'd be better if nothing happened at all. Then, it wouldn't even matter what Lowa is scheming. I'm not hoping for truth but peace! Tranquillity! Halcyon days! Which means—

"Pardon me, Your Royal Highness!" An official flew into the room. "An emissary has arrived with news from Sir Raklum! There are signs that fighting has broken out in their assigned territory!"

"……"

This is why he'd begged for nothing weird to happen. But his hopes had been dashed. They didn't even stand a chance.

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As with the Earthworld Empire, the Kingdom of Natra was home to a number of ethnic groups.

But they'd become diverse for different reasons.

The Empire had forcibly absorbed various races and tribes through acts of war, whereas those from the East and West flowed into the Kingdom of Natra of their own accord.

Not that it was an alluring country by any means. Its weather was harsh. Its land was infertile. It was lacking in all forms of industry and entertainment. Virtually no one would call it an easy country to live in, even out of flattery.

Then why would people come to this place?

Because they had nowhere else to go.

Those who'd committed crimes. Or those who had been persecuted for their race or ideology. Or those who had lost their homes in war or suffered at the hands of the government or disease.

They'd been driven from their homelands with no place to start anew. As they wandered from place to place, they'd finally stumbled upon the gateway between East and West, quietly settling amid the unforgiving weather in the Kingdom of Natra.

It was a slum on a nationwide scale. At least, that was how Wein described it.

Those who flooded into the country were generally minorities with no fond memories of systems and institutions. Which meant their thoughts on the kingdom weren't anything like, "Thank you for accepting us! We pledge our lives to this land!"

This isn't the start of an inspiring tale.

"I'm gonna get my revenge…"

"Leave us alone…"

"If the government is gonna take advantage of me, I'd rather…"

Terrible. Pessimistic.

But months became years, and those feelings melted away as they assimilated with the rest of the population. And those beside them in the royal capital were a tolerant bunch, loyal to their nation.

That said, the newcomers from local tribes and villages would sometimes project their own experiences onto the citizens around them, taking their anger out in bitter scuffle after scuffle. The instigators were often small clusters of impoverished groups. And when there was no blood shed, these fights were mostly settled by those involved by the time the government caught on.

Keyword: *mostly*.

"Ignoring our decree to stop and preparing for war on their own…" Wein grumbled upon reading a report in the tent.

"My apologies. I didn't imagine it would come to this." Raklum bowed his head before Wein.

"Don't worry about it. It was my own misjudgment."

It had all started with the construction of the channel on the Torito River.

The Torito River was under the direct control of the royal family, and it flooded from time to time. Under the king's orders, they were building a new

waterway to lower the volume of the main river, constructing a tributary that would run to a riverhead in a distant territory.

This entire process had continued well after Wein became regent and had finally reached its conclusion the other day.

But this was where the problems arose.

Two tribes in the area that the new tributary crossed had begun fighting.

The dispatched magistrates tried to persuade them to lay down their arms, but those pleas had fallen on deaf ears and the animosity had only deepened as time went on. But that wasn't what fazed Wein, since it wasn't unusual for quarrels to break out among their citizens. In his experience, these upstart militants were poorly armed for the most part, and that was why he'd assumed the hostilities could be quashed with trained troops dispatched by the government.

And that countermeasure had been effective for a short time. With the presence of government soldiers, the magistrate tried to start negotiations once more, but then an unexpected development occurred.

"—I can't believe it. Both tribes have obtained a huge cache of weapons."

The government's show of force was the only thing that had brought the warring tribes, now backed by arms suppliers, back to the negotiating table. All of Wein's initial assumptions had come crashing down.

"And no info on the source of the weapons?"

"I'm afraid not. We know they were procured by a merchant, but we're unsure of the supply chain."

"I see… All right."

It bothered him, but that took a backseat to suppressing the tribes.

"Your Royal Highness, I would like to ask one thing," Raklum requested nervously.

Wein looked at him. "What's up?"

"The person over there…" Raklum pointed to a corner of the tent at a girl with a poised smile—Lowellmina Earthworld.

"Pay me no mind. I'm here to observe."

"You heard her."

"Ooooookay…"

"Anyway. I'd like you to call in some soldiers, Raklum," Wein ordered.

Are they serious? Raklum silently voiced with his confused expression.

Wein let out a sigh in his head. *Geez, I honestly wonder why this*

happened, he thought, grumbling on the inside, as he mentally replayed the sequence of events that had brought him to this point.

Reports of a disturbance had left Wein racking his brains.

He needed to go and see things for himself in this situation. There was no question about it.

There was just one issue. The Imperial Princess Lowellmina was still visiting. And he couldn't just leave his guest of honor hanging.

I guess I can send Ninym…or sneak out myself if this can be settled quickly…

Wein had been busy turning the gears in his mind when Lowellmina showed up.

"It appears there is trouble."

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It never occurred to him to question how she'd found out. After all, she was staying at a foreign palace, which had its fair share of secrets, and it wouldn't be the least bit strange if she was using her envoys to discretely gather information.

Plus, it was entirely possible that Lowellmina was involved in this turmoil. With this in mind, he threw her a curve ball.

"Nothing major. I'll go there myself and resolve the issue immediately," Wein declared. This meant he'd be neglecting his guest of honor.

Would Lowellmina try to stop him from leaving or see him off amicably? He was going to assess her reaction to see if she was part of this whole scheme—

"I see. Well then, I'll come with you."

What?

This had Wein scrambling—along with her entire delegation.

There was no way that the envoys could bring the Imperial Princess to a potential battlefield, even though they belonged to an entirely different faction. To get her to change her mind, they attempted to persuade her out of it, with Fyshe leading the charge.

"We came with the purpose of confirming whether we should continue our alliance with Natra," Lowellmina replied. "With the threat of war looming over the entire continent, this is a good opportunity for me to see Prince Wein—a considerable leader—in action."

"But it's dangerous and…"

"An unfounded concern. I'll have the regent of this nation by my side. Nothing could be safer," she asserted.

They could only stay silent in response.

"Great. I'll be under your care, Wein."

And that's how Wein was roped into going to Raklum with Lowellmina in tow.

"…All right. What's up?" Wein asked Lowellmina, now that the two of them were alone in the tent.

Ninym wasn't standing beside him; instead, she was hanging back at the palace to handle government affairs.

“What’s up? I already told you. My goal is to confirm your abilities for the sake of our alliance, Wein.”

“Enough with the act,” he replied disparagingly.

But Lowellmina was unshakeable. “Hmm. Let’s just say I wanted to catch a glimpse of you gallantly leading your army. How’s that?”

“……”

He knew she wouldn’t answer him honestly.

Lowellmina giggled. “But enough about me. Wein, how do you intend to handle them?”

“…How else?”

According to the report, the warring tribes were named Heinoy and Eshio. They had struggled for power before, but up until the latest conflict, their skirmishes had been on the smaller side. That said, news of the tributary’s construction and its utility as a water source had intensified the conflict between them, and each had mobilized a force of a hundred people max, almost all of whom had been armed with weapons.

On the other hand, the government had dispatched two hundred soldiers. They were evenly matched in numbers, but that was where the similarities ended.

“We can neutralize them if we fight normally. I mean, our soldiers are leagues beyond them.”

At the end of the day, their opponents were a disorderly rabble with no formal training.

They could wield weapons, but they didn’t stand a chance against a skilled commander leading capable soldiers.

“True. Especially under your command, Wein. That said, I imagine there will be bloodshed.”

Lowellmina was correct to be concerned: It was unrealistic to think the troops would come away unscathed, even with an excellent commander at the helm. It would be a battle after all.

“But this is Wein Salema Arbalest we’re talking about. I know you won’t let things come to that… I’m sure you have something up your sleeve. Isn’t that right? Something unusual to avoid any casualties on your side.”

It was framed as a question, but there was conviction in her eyes as she sized him up, wondering what peculiar miracle he’d pull to fix this problem.

Wein took it in. “…Sorry. I think you’ve misunderstood, Lowa.” He took

a breath and grinned. *"I don't intend on letting anyone die in this battle, not even my enemies."*

Her eyes widened in surprise before she did a complete one-eighty and beamed, donning the face of a giddy child looking at her idol.

"I'm coming in, Your Highness!" Raklum boomed as he walked in.

Behind him were three soldiers.

"I've brought those whom you requested."

"Good work." Wein looked at the trio. "Torace of Heinoy. Caldia and Zold of Eshio."

""Sir!"" They straightened their backs and replied as one when he called their names.

Wein continued. "Are you aware of the situation?"

"Yes… Apologies for the trouble that our people have caused."

"It's not your fault. Do you have connections to your tribes?"

"Yes. I return home when time allows…"

"As do I. But I'm afraid it'll be hard to convince them…"

The soldiers must have thought Wein was planning to use their connections to move negotiations forward. But he had something entirely different in mind.

"That's not why I called you… I'm assuming you don't want everyone in your hometowns to die."

The three involuntarily looked at one another.

One spoke up quietly. "…Of course. It's terrible that it came down to this, but they are our brethren. We've grown up with them all our lives."

"Would you be willing to risk your lives for them?"

The three looked at one another again before nodding as one. ""We would!""

Wein grinned. "I'll hold you to it. I'll assign your duties now. My apologies, Raklum, but you'll have to take the fall for this."

Raklum replied with reverence. "I'll gladly take any responsibility for Your Highness."

Wein began to inform the soldiers of his plan as Lowellmina watched with mirth.

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The Heinoy were originally those from the West who had gathered together, working hard to get by each day. But they wouldn't be found in any written records, since they relied on oral tradition to pass down their history. Which meant there were a bunch of inaccuracies and omissions—including the point at which their relationship with the Eshio had become volatile.

There wasn't a single Heinoy who knew the reason for their fights, which also happened to be the case for the Eshio, too.

The only thing anyone thought they knew for sure was that the Eshio hailed from the East and that it was only natural the two would clash.

Nothing bonds family and friends like a common enemy.

"Oh! You're back, Torace!" Upon his return to the village that formed the core of his tribe, Torace was welcomed back with open arms.

"Great timing. We're about to start a war with the Eshio."

"You served while you were in the capital, right? That's great. Having you is like getting another hundred men."

"Don't worry, we made sure to secure weapons. There's no way we'll lose."

The villagers piped up one after the other.

Torace spoke with a concerned look. "Listen up. We don't have time for that."

They were immediately silenced by his peculiar state.

"The government troops are coming. I'm sure you know already. I was just with them."

The group of villagers stirred as their excitement turned to distrust. From their point of view, the kingdom's soldiers were a third-party meddling with their personal affairs. Moreover, their new weapons gave than more confidence than ever.

"You betraying us?" one of them accused.

"No! You got it backwards!" Torace raised his voice. "I may be one of their soldiers, but I'll never forget my roots as a Heinoy. I've come to tell you all about their strategy! The one in command is a man named Raklum, and his plan is absolutely ludicrous. Listen to this."

He stopped for a beat. "He wants to demolish the river embankment…!"

Feelings of shock and confusion rippled across the villagers in waves.

The embankment was essentially their flood wall. It was built to prevent water damage from the newly dug-out channel. The region would be

rendered useless if it was destroyed. And any attempt to rebuild it would require extensive time and manpower.

"Wh-what?! Why?!"

An obvious response.

Knowing that its construction had been done under the watchful eye of the royal family, they couldn't think of any logical reason why the government soldiers would choose to destroy it.

"The dispatched troops are here to destroy this land, even though His Highness wishes to avoid bloodshed. But Raklum wants to hurry up and make this problem disappear—by destroying the embankment! Then he'll blame it on the Heinoy and Eshio and crush us in the name of justice…!"

All present were at a loss for words. They didn't all believe him right away, of course, but the villagers knew they were the ones who'd put the troops between a rock and a hard place. And no one dared call this a bluff when it threatened to turn the territorial feud between the Heinoy and Eshio on its head.

"Wh…what do we do if that happens?"

"I—I know. We should inform the prince."

"Don't be stupid. They'll make sure the message never gets to him. Besides, it's not like he has any reason to believe us! And it'd take too long for the message to reach him in the first place!"

"Time… Torace! When is it?! When are they going to destroy the embankment?!"

Torace adopted an expression filled with concern. "I'm not sure. I slipped away to warn everyone. But if Raklum is trying to wrap things up, it could be as soon as tonight."

They imagined the worst-case scenario, which sent a shiver down their spines.

Their original plan had been to end their long feud with the Eshio to take control of the basin and prosper. Now, it was looking like they'd lose the land that was rightfully theirs, be falsely accused of a crime, and then be forced to suffer a military crackdown. It was completely unacceptable.

"What do we do…?! How could this happen?!"

"Wh-what about trying to reconcile with the Eshio?!"

"Quit screwing around! Make up with them? At this point? Forget it!"

"Then, what?!"

It was here that Torace raised his voice.

“Calm down! As we’re wasting time arguing, the troops could be on the move at this very moment!”

“That’s right! We’ve gotta focus on them first!”

“If they plan to destroy the embankment, we’ve gotta stop them!”

“Gather any fighters! We’ll set up positions by the riverbank and engage the enemy!”

The tribe started moving with haste. No one noticed that Torace had let out a huge sigh of relief as he helped with the preparations.

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Since they’d been preparing to go to war, the Heinoy had their people and provisions ready to go and set out quickly.

They had just under one hundred people, and every person was armed. They identified the target site based on the information that Torace had given them. It was paramount that they engage the troops as soon they arrive, which made them naturally pick up their pace.

But the group stopped dead in their tracks.

“H-hey, that’s the Eshio!”

On the other side of the hill was another armed group of one hundred. As the two groups spotted each other, they halted to observe the situation in bewilderment.

“Wh-what should we do…? Go after ’em?!”

Torace turned as each tightened their grip on their weapons. “Wait! If we fight the Eshio here, how will we stop the soldiers?!”

“That’s right! Stop them from destroying the embankment first!”

“…All right, let’s go! But if the Eshio rush on us, don’t hold back, and don’t drop your guard!” barked their representative.

The Heinoy started off toward the embankment, just as the Eshio began marching toward the exact same destination, maintaining distance from each other.

“What the hell are they doing…? Don’t tell me they’re heading to the same place, too!”

“That would be my guess. They must know the government troops have their eye on it.”

Both groups arrived at the designated spot.

On the upside, the troops hadn't arrived yet, meaning the embankment remained in one piece. But that only meant they had made it in time for the worst-case scenario. Each began preparations for their assault on the soldiers.

It was a peculiar scene. The two opposing sides kept watch over each other while working toward the same goal.

"…I guess that should do it."

As the sun began to set, the two tribes finished getting into a basic defense formation.

"We're all beat. Let's take the patrol in shifts. That way, everyone can get some rest."

"But don't let your guard down. We have no idea when those soldiers are planning to attack."

If this had been an exam, their response would deserve passing marks at the least. There was no doubt their sense of purpose would sustain them if the troops came.

But they had no idea that keeping their minds and bodies alert for an indeterminate amount of time would be this difficult.

"No sign of the soldiers…"

"Yeah… Damn it! If you're gonna come, then just come already…!"

"Hey, did you just hear something?"

"You already said that a while ago. It's all in your head."

"How long are you two going to keep yammering? Sleep…!"

Keep vigilant, but not *too* alert. Otherwise, it would only create unnecessary worry, which won't allow the inexperienced to get any rest. The weight of a sleepy body and an unsound heart are not inconsequential things.

From sundown to sunrise the government forces mounted no attacks, and the Heinoy tribe didn't get a wink of rest in the meantime.

"…Hey, Torace, what's going on?!"

"Weren't they gonna attack?!"

But even their frustrated voices lacked energy.

Nearby, the Eshio seemed to fare no better. Any outsider would notice the obvious air of fatigue that hung over them. After all, the tribes had arrived wielding unfamiliar weapons, and they lacked proper sleep. With hands trembling and hearts on edge, the group had become completely exhausted without seeing a single moment of combat.

“This is their target. They’ll attack. I’m sure of it.”

“We’re asking when—”

“H-hey! Wait! I can hear…”

Horse hooves hitting the ground.

But there weren’t just one or two horses. There were dozens approaching.

“They’re here! They’re here! Grab your weapons!”

With great composure, the soldiers appeared before the panicked group rushing into formation.

“Th-that’s…!”

They all held their breath.

In a display of perfectly synchronized motion, the troop moved in the shape of a huge dragon. And though they were all human, there was an enormous difference between their smooth gestures and the erratic movements of the Heinoy. Even their formation was unsteady.

“And now, we’ve got to fight them…” someone said in a trembling voice.

But it was clear they wouldn’t stand a chance.

The hearts and minds of the tribespeople were at their limits. And the dignified appearance of the regular soldiers dampened their morale. It was a miracle no one had tried to run away. But once the battle broke out, the tribes would be obliterated, right along with that so-called miracle. In their minds, the worst possible future played out, as one cavalryman stepped out from a row of his comrades.

“I bring news to the Heinoy and Eshio! We are the soldiers of the Kingdom of Natra! We will not tolerate any disturbances on this land! Lay down your weapons and surrender!” the cavalryman warned in a crisp voice.

If this had been the day before, the Heinoy and Eshio would have bared their teeth and stood their ground. But they didn’t even have the strength to talk big anymore.

That said, they remained locked in place, knowing what hell would break loose if the embankment was destroyed.

That’s why everyone was shaken to the core by the cavalryman’s following words.

“Listen up! Our former captain has been dismissed. Our current captain is His Highness, Crown Prince Wein. He has traveled all this way from the royal capital! By his command, we will spare the lives of all who surrender and restart negotiations with the two tribes!”

The uproar that followed the herald's words spread not only to the Heinoy, but the Eshio as well.

"What?! His Highness is in command…?"

"Isn't he the leader with enough prowess to defeat thirty thousand Marden soldiers…?"

"That's right. But they say he extends his goodwill even to those of foreign nations."

"That's what I heard, too… Is this true? He'll speak with us if we lay down our weapons?"

They wrestled with contradiction and hope.

If they'd assessed the situation calmly, they might have realized that things had taken an unnatural turn. The tribes had come to the embankment to prevent its destruction—based on information from their kin, who had returned out of the blue. And once they arrived and forced themselves to their physical limits, their enemy had appeared only to offer them saving grace. If someone had been watching everything from overhead, they would have found this situation was very contrived.

But neither of the two tribes took notice. After all, it'd been part of the plan to grind down their minds and hearts to the point of carelessness.

"I say again! Throw down your weapons and surrender! His Highness has no desire to spill any blood without need!" the cavalryman shouted as if urging them on.

Then, one of the Heinoy dropped a weapon to the ground.

As if setting off a chain reaction, the others began to let go, one by one, traveling all the way down to the Eshio. When all the tribespeople had disarmed themselves, the fight over the new canal ended without spilling a single drop of blood.

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"Marvelous. I have nothing else to say."

Upon comprehending the entirety of Wein's plan, Lowellmina was unreserved in her admiration.

"You fabricated a nonexistent battle plan, sent out spies, manipulated the enemy… Easy to say, but hard to do. As expected of you, Wein."

"If it wasn't for my reputation of defeating Marden, I bet it would have

been a little trickier."

The two were inside a tent. Outside, the soldiers and the surrendered warriors were sharing a meal.

Wein had fed the tribes under the guise of helping them recover from their fatigue, but he had something else in mind, of course.

"And your plan now is to take this opportunity to make the two tribes reconcile. You're as crafty as always, Wein."

"You're forced to rely on creativity when your kingdom is broke."

Even if everything was fine and dandy for the time being, the Heinoy and Eshio would inevitably fight again if he didn't uproot the deep-seated hostility they held for one another. That was why Wein planned to have the two become one to make the region more secure.

"Excuse me, Your Highness!" Raklum appeared, along with the three soldiers from Heinoy and Eshio.

"We've come at your request."

"Yes. Relax… Torace, Caldia, Zold. It was dangerous task, but you did well. This is all thanks to you. I'll be sure you're rewarded later."

""Sir?!""

To be personally complimented and rewarded by the crown prince was the greatest honor a soldier could receive. They grinned from ear to ear as they bowed to Wein deeply.

"Raklum, I put you through some trouble."

"A poor reputation will command more fear. I would not have been able to avoid bloodshed if I had been left in charge. Compared to that, this is nothing worth your concern," he assured the prince, even though his opportunity for valor had been snatched away from him.

I'll make it up to him eventually, Wein thought before he turned to the other three.

"By the way, you're all bachelors, right?"

"What? Um, well, I am, but…" one of them admitted, nodding in confusion.

The others followed suit.

"Any lovers or sweethearts?"

The three shook their heads, making their bewilderment even more pronounced.

Wein dropped a bomb on them. "I see, I see. In that case, this will go

quick. What do you think about marrying a girl from the opposing tribe?"

""What?!"" the three spit out, panicked.

Wein went on. "I intend to use this chance to reconcile the two groups to prevent this from happening ever again. It'd be quick and easy if we could form familial relations between the tribes. You three will be the trailblazers."

"No, that's, um."

"Didn't you say you'd risk your life for your brethren?" Wein planted a hand on Torace's shoulder. "Which means you're prepared to dig your own grave—metaphorically."

But that's a whole other story, the trio silently protested with their expressions, which mixed with shock and confusion.

Wein chuckled. "Well, no one's forcing you. Just know that based on our royal records, there was a time when the two tribes were united. To assume you can't exist in harmony is nothing more than prejudice. You may go now."

Raklum and the soldiers left the tent.

Lowellmina had been watching the situation unfold and spoke up once their footsteps had receded. "Wein, did they actually get along in the past?"

"Of course. I'm sure the records will materialize once I return to the palace."

"I see… The work of an awful swindler."

"If being stupid honest would bring wealth to my country, I'd gladly cut off my forked tongue," Wein responded, chuckling wryly as he stood. "Well, I've got a meeting with the tribe leaders now. I can't let foreigners sit in. Sorry."

"You've gone above and beyond to humor me. I'll behave while I wait. But come back soon. I hate being alone."

"Then pray the meeting goes well." Wein waved and exited the tent.

The tribe leaders were waiting for him. But that wasn't where he was headed.

"I've been waiting." Raklum had gone ahead to a tent set up in a slightly removed area.

Behind him were countless bundles of weapons.

"These are the weapons confiscated from both tribes."

"Good work."

The catalyst for this feud was construction along the river, but it had

spiraled out of control because of these weapons. If the tribes hadn't gotten ahold of them, the dispatched troops would have resolved this without a hitch.

Where in the world did the weapons come from? Wein intended to find out, but it was sensitive information that needed to be handled with care. This was why he had lied to Lowellmina and kept her at a distance.

"From what I can tell, they're new," Raklum continued. "But they aren't products of Natra…"

Hmm, let's say they were made abroad. How did they find their way north to Natra? If someone's trying to sell a bunch of weapons in the boonies, their prices would need to be hyper marked down.

Which meant there had to be a country somewhere with an overabundant supply of weapons. That would be the only way to find a seller who would be okay with such a huge discount. And there were few reasons for a country to hoard this many weapons other than war.

As Raklum's reasoning ran through the back of his mind, Wein spoke bitterly. "…This is bad."

"Your Highness?" Raklum was unnerved by his master's unusual state.

Wein recovered in the next moment and turned to him.

"Raklum, get me a pen and some paper. I have a message for Ninym. Start preparing to withdraw the troops. By confiscating their weapons, we've broken the spirit of the tribes. For the time being, we'll leave the negotiations to the magistrate—without military presence."

"S-Sir!" responded Raklum without missing a beat.

Wein watched him go from the edge of his vision before turning toward the tent where Lowellmina was waiting.

"—Thanks for nothing, Lowellmina."

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Lowellmina loved the Empire.

She loved it for its diverse array of nations, peoples, cultures, ideologies, and faiths jumbled together in a disorderly mess.

That's why she had devoted her entire life to the Empire. She dreamed of supporting her nation and devoured knowledge with greed. She had no doubt that she would be rewarded if she kept it up.

But those dreams were dashed at a certain banquet.

The Emperor had quizzed his eldest son on politics. When his son was unable to respond, the Emperor's mood became sour, dampening the vibe of the entire party.

It had been at this point that Lowellmina offered the correct answer from beside them. The Emperor praised her, and the vassals remarked that they'd expect no less of their Imperial Princess. The eldest son had turned bright red with embarrassment, but she paid him no mind. For Lowellmina, it was more important to become a rock for the Empire as quickly as possible.

But from that day forward, the circumstances around her changed.

Her time to learn politics became crammed with lessons on poetry and dance. The vassals engaged in national politics kept their distance. And to top it off, she was forced to stop sitting in on the affairs of the Imperial Court as she'd been allowed before. That was when it became clear that this was happening according to someone's will.

She initially had thought it was the work of her embarrassed eldest brother, but that wasn't the case.

It was all under the orders of the Emperor.

As a father, the Emperor loved Lowellmina, but he hadn't the slightest intention of naming her his successor—because she was a girl.

The Empire was a country that held onto a creed of talent over status. And yet, the Emperor held onto the belief that women were best served when dolled up and speaking in soft, melodic voices. They were not meant to bear the burden of national politics.

But Lowellmina was jolted to her very core by the events that followed.

When she realized that the Emperor's will was unwavering, she began trying to work through the vassals. But not a single one paid any attention to her. They had feared invoking the Emperor's displeasure—
or so one might think.

In reality, most of the vassals agreed with the Emperor that women shouldn't be involved in government affairs. Even the court ladies agreed it was the unconditional truth.

And the most terrifying part of all: They meant her no harm. With good intentions and these beliefs, they were keeping her away from politics, knowing full well she was more than capable. They didn't want her to know the unhappiness that was part and parcel with meddling in these affairs.

How could Lowellmina describe her shock?

She wasn't facing a conspiracy of just one or two people. And it wasn't only in the palace but most of her country that stood in her way. It was a barricade of people who shared this cultural hegemony. And when Lowellmina found out about this system of beliefs, she realized there was nothing she could do to change it.

From then on, she locked herself away in the palace, feeling as though she would suffocate upon looking at her personal library, knowing that studying was meaningless. She ceased to flip through the pages. She took her frustration out on those around her. She lamented that she was born a girl.

But time was relentless and continued to pass without change.

One day, her older sister made a proposal. She couldn't stand to see her sister wasting away anymore: What if she went to the military academy for a change of pace?

Lowellmina agreed. They schemed that she would attend under the pretext of scoping out potential suitors. Of course, no one from the Imperial family could choose their own marriage partners. But even the Emperor must have been concerned about his beloved daughter. With her sister's support, it was a done deal.

She would lie about her social status upon entering the academy. There were plenty of reasons for this, but the true motive was that if she wasn't herself, Lowellmina could at last escape this feeling of asphyxiation.

Which led to her meeting…

"Wein, the final painting is here."

Strang was carrying a canvas into the room. It was a piece by a famous artist. Its value was enough to cause the hands of those who knew its name to tremble just by holding its frame.

But Strang and Wein were handling it without care—not that it was weird or anything, since it was a fake.

"Nice. Better than I expected."

"Yeah. It'll take someone with a good eye to spot the differences in all our counterfeits."

"But I can't believe you were able to get your hands on these, Strang."

“I have a few connections with artists. Glen, how are things with you?”

“I’ve got a path to sneak into the mansion as well as an escape route, in case something goes wrong.” Glen gave a sour look as he answered. “But are we really going through with this? The guy’s an Imperial aristocrat.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, it’s a bit late for that, Glen. Remember: Our target exploited his subjects, right?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“C’mon, it’s not like we’re assassinating him. He’s used dirty money to procure his needless collection of paintings, and we’re just gonna swap them out with Strang’s pieces of art. I’m telling you, no one will notice.”

“He’s right, Glen. The guy has no eye for art. We’re gonna offer them to someone who understands their true worth and distribute the payout to his people. Justice will be served!”

“Justice… When you put it that way… I’m on board!”

“As gullible as ever.”

“You’re right. I worry he’ll be tricked by some nasty friends.”

“Did you guys say something?”

““Nothing,”” Wein and Strang answered together, shaking their heads to the side.

Ninym appeared in the room. “I’ve sealed the business deal. Our paintings will be ready to head West.”

“All right. Let’s go and get the goods.”

The group began hauling the paintings out of the room one by one.

Just as Wein went for another, he turned around. “What’s wrong, Lowa? You’re spacing out.”

Lowellmina had been completely motionless in a corner of the room. Her face twitched slightly after being called on.

“…Just observing.”

“Observing? What?”

“You.”

Wein blinked and flashed a pompous smile. “Guess you finally caught on that I’m hot stuff.”

“Not at all.”

“Oh.”

“Not in the least.”

“You just had to say it twice, huh…”

“Impossible.”

“Is it *really* necessary to say it a third time?!” he yowled, kneading and stretching his own face.

And I thought I was pretty good-looking, his expression whined silently.

Lowellmina let out a heavy sigh. “How should I say this? I guess I’m jealous that you seem to live without a care in the world.”

“What? Trying to pick a fight? Have you been trying to stir me up this entire time?”

“It’s not like that. I mean it. I envy you,” she admitted in a melancholy way.

Wein observed her before giving her a small nod, as if in sympathy. “All right. Cool. See ya.”

“Hold it.” She yanked his collar as he turned on his heel to walk away. “I think this is the part where you hear me out.”

“No way! I want absolutely nothing to do with your annoying mess…!”

“After all I’ve done to plan this exciting adventure to swap out an aristocrat’s artwork? And you’re still going to be a stingy…?”

“Hey now. Listen up, Lowa. Think of me as an idiot who sees himself as a special snowflake. You can mock me when I fall flat on my face, like, *Hah! Serves you riiiiiight!* I’m the type of guy who will pass up anything that might create a problem for me, including listening to the woes of teenage girls!”

“You shouldn’t puff out your chest while you say that!”

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“Well, when you have nothing to be ashamed of, your spine becomes straighter,” Wein declared as he tossed his hair back with a dramatic flair, but Lowellmina kept her hand firmly on the nape of his neck.

Wein helplessly continued. “…Uh, so, you should go to Ninym for that. Yeah, Ninym. Since you’re both girls. It’s probably better that way.”

“It can’t be Ninym. It has to be you.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

Their gazes pierced each other for a moment.

Wein finally caved. “Ugh, fine, I get it. Just spit it out already. I promise to grunt at the right intervals.”

“…It’s about my family.”

“Oh boy! Here it is! Ranking at the top of the charts for Most Annoying Problems of All Time, family issues!” he joked.

Lowellmina glared at him, but this didn’t bother Wein in the slightest.

“Ooh, let me guess. Your family is keeping you from doing great things because it’s not proper for a lady, and you’re fed up with it. Right?”

This startled Lowellmina. “H-how did you…?”

She’d thought that he had somehow worked out she was actually the Imperial Princess, but he proved otherwise.

“You’ve got top grades at the academy. You don’t act shy around the guys, and you stand your ground. Plus, a bunch of other stuff besides. It’s easy enough to guess what’s on your mind.”

That wasn’t a simple matter at all. This confirmed her earlier suspicions that Wein possessed a rare insight.

“If you plan on asking me for advice, I’ve prepared a jokey answer and a real one. Which do you want?”

“The real one,” she said without hesitation, and Wein obliged.

“Start a war.”

“……What?” Lowellmina blinked back at his perplexing response.

Wein must have known that this reaction was coming.

“Listen up. This isn’t about your family. Your problem is a culmination of the Empire’s—no, the *continent’s* culture of misogyny, which it’s spent years trying to indoctrinate. I can’t even imagine the weight and depth of it.” Wein went on. “But it’s a product made by and for the people. Just like language and etiquette, it’s nothing more than a local rule that applies to humans.”

"…I've never thought of it that way."

She understood what he was saying. Compared to absolutes like aging and gravity, ideologies and cultures were nothing more than local rules. They could change according to the circumstances of a country or its people. In fact, they had a history of doing just that.

Okay, but why would you think to suggest that I change it myself…?

Lowellmina knew Wein's true identity and that he'd received an advanced education. But that could also be said about herself. And yet, unlike him, she hadn't been able to make a bold decision.

It wasn't as if Lowellmina was at fault, though. The majority held the same mindset she did.

Wein was the odd one out for thinking his solution was perfectly natural.

"For example, we all used to eat with our bare hands, but these days, it's common sense to use a knife and fork. Why? Because someone way back when spread the word, and people made it part of the established culture. As a result, eating with your hands was eliminated. The same can happen with chauvinism."

"…You're saying we can change? By our own hands."

Wein gave an unwavering nod. "There isn't anything inherently good or bad about ideas and beliefs. They're the same as strengths and weaknesses. Like how weak people lose or powerless countries are destroyed. In the same way, shaky beliefs can be weeded out. That's why, Lowa, if you want to reject a widespread idea, you can do nothing short of solidifying your ideals and starting a war."

"You say I should make them solid… But how?"

"An idea is stronger when more people are backing it. Find others who are dissatisfied and become friends with them. Name and give a voice to your goals to spread the word. Make an emotional appeal to gain sympathy from the masses. take advantage of your eloquence to win over intellectuals."

Wein answered so smoothly that Lowellmina couldn't help but shudder. Were they really the same age? He sounded like a wise man who'd been living for an eternity.

"Win the battle of wits, and your ideas become 'right.' Our cultural norms are strong enough to punch down any other beliefs. You've experienced it, too. And they can stand firm against other ideologies because they're 'right.' You have to usurp their place if you don't want to be crushed."

"…You really have a way of casually stating the impossible."

Wein had given Lowellmina more than enough information to sort through and digest. In fact, she was so overwhelmed she hadn't thought of an action plan. But she understood that he was suggesting the road less traveled.

"Depending on the situation, your suggestion will end in my death."

"But if you do nothing, you'll be giving in to society. The death of your soul. Doesn't it help to think that way? Die physically or psychologically. The choice is up to you."

"That doesn't help at all…" Lowellmina lamented, sighing and shaking her head.

Wein was saying the absurd. This just wasn't practical.

On the other hand, her heart did feel lighter for some reason. Even if it wasn't realistic, there was now a path toward confronting the wall that was blocking her. It transformed her beliefs to learn of its existence.

"…Hey, Wein." It surprised her to hear the gentleness and hope in her voice. "If I chose to fight…would you support me?"

"What? No way."

Lowellmina punted Wein in the shin.

"Ow! Damn! What was that for?!"

"This! Is! Normally! Where! You! Would! Nod!"

"Don't be stupid! I've got stuff to do, too!"

"And what could that possibly be?!"

"I've got lots on my plate! Lots! …Well, to tell you the truth, they're all pains in the ass. There's a good chance I'll bail halfway."

"Then give up now and help me!"

"Aren't you the one talking nonsense?!"

"That makes two of us!"

They continued to yell at each other for some time as the argument unraveled. When their heads finally cooled off, Lowellmina heaved a big sigh.

"—Okay. You're right. This is my problem. I should be the one to take care of it."

When she thought about it, it'd been shameless of her to demand help on top of asking for advice. Not to mention Wein was the crown prince of Natra, which he didn't know that she knew. When she considered his position, it was obvious there was no way he could have accepted. Lowellmina reflected

on her foolishness.

"Thank you, Wein. I've found my goal, thanks to you. I have a lot to think about."

"Glad to hear. I'm rooting for you," Wein replied as Lowellmina bowed deeply.

Ninym's voice rang from outside the room. "Wein! Lowa! What are you doing? We're ready to go!"

"Whoops. Guess we got caught up in conversation."

"Seems that way. Let's go, Wein."

The two exited the room and went down the hallway together.

After they'd been walking for some time, Wein spoke up with hesitation. "Ah… Well, Lowa."

"What is it?"

"If you need my help, I guess you could get me involved in your mess if you want."

Lowellmina stopped without thinking, but Wein walked on as if nothing had happened. In a flustered state, she rushed to catch up to him.

"…You'd be willing to get wrapped up in this?" she asked with a dim hope.

"Nope, I'd avoid it at all costs."

Curse this man, she thought after seeing her dreams dashed.

But then Wein clarified his true intentions. "Go ahead and work hard to get me mixed up in it. If I can't escape—well, I'd probably end up lending a hand or two."

"……" She didn't break stride this time.

Keeping in step with Wein, she spoke quietly after a long pause. "You're a strange one, Wein."

"You're the last person I want to hear that from."

"Well, let's just say we're one and the same."

As Lowellmina chuckled to herself, her mirth soon spread to Wein. The two continued walking together toward where their friends waited for them.

◆◇◆

"——Mmm."

Lowellmina opened her eyes as the sun beat down on her face.

“Good morning, Princess Lowellmina,” greeted Fyshe.

Ever since their arrival Natra, she’d been the one in charge of waking Lowellmina each morning in the palace bedroom allotted to her. After the feud with the tribes had been settled, Lowellmina had returned to the palace with Wein.

“Good morning, Fyshe… *Yawn*.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. I had a nostalgic dream.”

“From your countenance, I’m guessing it was a lovely one.”

“Well… It’s a very important memory of mine.”

Although she was probably the only one who felt that way.

After all, when they snuck into that aristocrat’s mansion, one unexpected event happened after another, and the situation had escalated into a chaotic uproar. There was no doubt that all memory of their chat had been wiped clean from Wein’s mind.

“Fyshe, I don’t have anything in particular scheduled today, right?” Lowellmina confirmed as she stretched lightly.

Since coming to Natra, every day had been packed with dinners and visiting various locations, including a battlefield, but she’d recalled there was nothing in particular on this day.

But the reply was different from her memories.

“The crown prince would like to invite you to tea.”

“Prince Wein, huh.” The moment the name registered in her brain, her sleepy mind sprang to life.

“What shall I do?” Fyshe asked.

“Please inform him that I look forward to it.”

“Understood.”

This was Wein they were talking about. There was no way he was inviting her to make small talk.

Would he doggedly probe her? Or did he have other intentions entirely?

I accept his challenge, whatever it may be.

Lowellmina donned a fearless smile and rose from the bed.

A clear blue sky spread over the Kingdom of Natra, and warm sunlight filled

the air, which was unusual for this time of year. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't be possible to leisurely sit in the breeze as it blew through open windows, but by pairing it with the warmth of the sun's rays and a cup of tea, it was almost pleasant.

"I've been impressed time and time again since arriving in this country, including by the flavor of your black tea."

Following her arrival, Lowellmina was enjoying a cup of tea that had been poured in a white porcelain teacup.

"Its rich aroma. Its color, a clear crimson without a hint of murkiness. Amazing. I imagine it'd be in high demand at the Empire. Why haven't you exported it yet?"

"Well, the tea leaves only grow in the mountain ranges," Wein replied directly across from her. "We've been tinkering around with a few things, but mass production is completely out of reach in the near future. Which means most of it is consumed domestically."

"That's a shame."

"You wanna bring some home with you?"

"I would love that." Lowellmina smiled and sipped her tea.

If there had been an artist or an aspiring one, they would have taken to paper or canvas to capture the perfect beauty of the scene. But there was no one in the room besides Lowellmina and Wein, and neither were the artistic type, unfortunately.

"Guess you'll be going home soon, Lowa."

"Yes. I've had a lovely time."

It'd been almost two weeks since the delegation arrived. As Wein had just vocalized, the day she was to return to the Empire was fast approaching.

"My only regret is that I couldn't get you to declare that you'll be supporting my cause of usurping the Empire until today."

"BWA-HA-HA!" Wein guffawed before cutting himself off. "You've got some nerve. I know that's not what you've been scheming all along."

This caused a rift between them.

A troubled look flashed across Lowellmina's face in that split second.

"You say the strangest things." She was obviously shaken, like if she'd been falsely suspected of wrongdoing. "Why would I come otherwise? To rekindle an old friendship? To see the sights? To investigate the gold mine that your kingdom seized?"

“Nah. There’s only one reason why you’d put yourself at risk to come here, Lowa.” His gaze pierced through her. “It’s all in order to save the Empire. Right, Lowellmina Earthworld?”

Agitation evaporated from her face.

She giggled. “I’d like to say bravo, Wein, that’s just like you…but you know nothing at all. How could you possibly tie this trip to saving the Empire?” Lowellmina asked mischievously.

Wein adopted a bitter expression. “Which means you won’t come clean with me. Fine.”

He continued. “Okay, I’ll be frank. I’m guessing that at the first hint of spring, the conquered nations in the former alliance are going to stage a revolt against the Empire with the other territories in tow. And you’re here to prevent that.”

“……Well, well, well.” Lowellmina took an elegant sip of her tea. “And would you care to tell me how you came to this conclusion?”

“It hit me when I saw the weapons of the Heinoy and Eshio. They were produced in the West, which meant they came into Natra through a transit point in the East. That means they’re just a morsel of the stash of weapons that the Empire prepared in case of a civil war.”

“…You’re saying our glorious Empire uses weapons of the West? What a distasteful topic. That said, it’s not all that strange. I know Imperial equipment is of the highest caliber, but with three factions fighting over them, there’s hardly enough to go around. As a last resort, isn’t acquiring weapons from the West the logical next step?”

“Yeah, but only if you hadn’t divided them equally among yourselves.” Wein flung a stack of documents on the desk. “I mobilized my troops to investigate—all hands on deck. We looked into the stocks of weapons in each territory and found that they’d all somehow been spread among the three factions of the Imperial Princes.”

Lowellmina took the papers and gave a quiet groan. “To discover this in such a short amount of time… Your network of spies shouldn’t be underestimated.”

Wein went on. “We looked into the future goals of those in the occupied territories: connections, extortion, fame, advancement… From the outside, it appears they’ve aligned themselves with one of the princes for a variety of reasons—and this resulted in the current struggle for power. But follow the

flow of weapons. You'll see that this situation was created with a clear purpose in mind."

"……"

"Speak of a rivalry between the factions. Heighten concern for civil war. Distribute equipment en masse to the occupied territories under the pretext of preparing for an internal conflict. Use this opportunity to start a rebellion in these areas to destroy the Empire in one go. That's the scenario currently coming to a boil on the Eastern side of the continent, Lowa. How's that?" Wein laid things out with eloquence and true power.

It was a voice that could overpower and shackle her, forcing her to nod along.

But Lowellmina deflected it.

"You're coming up short. Let's assume your hypothesis is correct. Why am I here? If you're saying I knew about this all along, shouldn't I be warning my brothers?"

"I bet you did. They just didn't listen. Or they listened and chose to do nothing. It'd be hard to completely cover up these traps for the rebellion. If it were me, I'd intentionally spread fake information and give my opponents in a false sense of security. I'm assuming all three princes have been informed of the impending revolt but are predicting it to be smaller than its actual size. Instead of squashing the rebellion before it starts, I bet each plan is being used as an opportunity to beat down the other two factions from the throne."

Wein snorted before continuing. "Well, to be precise, those around them guided the princes into thinking this way. The vassals must be scheming that it'd be better to build connections with the West—especially with the Emperor laid low by illness and his successors found wanting."

And this was where Lowa's status made the greatest impact.

Though the Empire was a meritocracy, men spearheaded politics for the most part. There was no room for women. And Lowa herself had no notable accomplishments in the political realm, which meant it didn't matter if she warned her brothers of oncoming revolt. Their disloyal retainers could easily put her in her place.

"And when you realized that you couldn't rely on your brothers, you made a big gamble: To pressure one of the forces to start their rebellion early, convince your brothers to recognize its danger, and provide hard proof of the uprising. And you chose to do that in—"

“Natra. And the Gairan State next to it—where Marquis Antgadull has his stronghold.” Lowellmina released a lamenting sigh and looked at Wein. “Incredible… You’ve come to the right conclusion.”

“Is this where I say I’m honored to receive your praise?”

“I offer you a kiss as a reward.”

“I’ll pass.”

Lowellmina shrugged her shoulders as if to say *How unfortunate*.

“In the grand scheme of things, you’re spot on. I felt that something was off about the factions, so I had Fyshe help me investigate. I picked up on the scheme around summertime, but I was unable to persuade my brothers. I couldn’t accomplish anything by myself, either. Which is why I thought I would use myself as bait to throw off their pace.”

“With your nominal claim to the throne.”

Lowellmina nodded. “I assume that the nations in the West want to march to the other side of the continent once the Empire has fallen to ruin. But those in the former alliance have different plans entirely. They hope to rise as independent nations and achieve distinction, but they view the West as a threat. Once they topple the Empire and achieve independence, they need to absorb the Empire’s power to resist Western interference.”

“If the rebellion succeeds, the princes will be killed—no doubt,” Wein added. “And your older sister, the Imperial Princess who married an Imperial aristocrat, would be another likely target for execution. That would leave the youngest, unmarried Imperial Princess—you. By capturing you, the captor can take the Empire’s legacy for themselves… In fact, they could even call their nation ‘the Second Empire.’ That wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility.”

“And what do you think might happen if that person in question left the palace without a proper guard?”

“They’d go out of their way to get a hold of you, even if it was difficult.”

This chick is bonkers, Wein thought.

He understood her reasoning. There was no other way to escape this quandary, meaning it was all she could do. That said, humans tended to fall into indecision when it came down to the wire, and he knew she was unusually courageous for walking this metaphorical tightrope.

“I mulled over who might fall hook, line, and sinker and decided on Marquis Antgadull. I knew he was part of the rebellion, but his family has a

bad rep for betraying the alliance in the past. I was sure he would want me as a pawn, no matter what."

It was here Lowellmina smiled.

"This was around the time I heard you were searching for a princess. A real lifesaver. I was able to position myself within your neighbor's reach—for the taking of Marquis Antgadull."

Which meant she'd come to Natra before winter set in to give his army the chance to seize her.

It would be midwinter upon her capture, meaning the Imperial forces would have trouble operating at maximum capacity. His army would only need to hold back their advances until the revolt in spring. There was no doubt she could count on Marquis Antgadull making this assumption.

She'd stayed in Natra long enough to buy time for the marquis to build his army. Lowellmina spoke of her plan casually, but it was a frightfully elaborate scheme.

That's why Wein had one point he didn't understand.

"…What were you gonna do if I handed you over to the marquis?"

"Odds are you wouldn't. And when I arrived, I became absolutely certain this wouldn't be the case."

"Why?"

"Because of Ninym."

This was unexpected. Wein was slightly caught off guard.

She reminisced. "Back in our school days, there was a time when Ninym dueled with the other students."

"…And what about it?"

"I thought it was because they looked down on her for being a Flahm. But she was usually calm and collected. Something was off about this situation. Then why did she fight? …What if I said she wanted to solve this issue with her own hands to prevent *you* from taking these students down?"

"……" Wein couldn't answer.

But his silence spoke volumes.

"You and Ninym share a special bond. I think it takes precedence to everything else. If you were to hand me over, the revolt would kick off and usher in a surge of Western influence. With Natra on the border between the two sides, you'd be unable to escape. That's why I knew you wouldn't do it. There's one place you'll never side with: the West, where they treat the

Flahm as slaves."

"…That's why you were glad to see Ninym still by my side." Wein brushed back his hair as he sighed. "I thought it was odd, but now I get what you were trying to say."

"Of course, I meant what I said as a friend, too. In any case," Lowellmina went on, "those were my secrets. That's it. I'm sure that Marquis Antgadull will raise his forces to invade Natra and capture me shortly. You stop him for me, and I save the Empire."

If Wein refused to hand her over, that meant a clash with Antgadull forces was unavoidable. And since it was known throughout the land that Imperial envoys were here on business, he couldn't insist on claiming complete ignorance, either.

"…Have you lost faith in me? To think I'd call myself your friend and use you for the sake of the Empire."

Anyone with a heightened sense of hearing might have detected the slight trembling in Lowellmina's voice.

Either way, Wein only had one answer. "Of course not. That's what makes you the Lowa Felbis I've come to know." He grinned. "But let me ask you this: Will Antgadull's army really come to invade us?"

Lowellmina knit her eyebrows. "…I see. You've made your own move."

When she thought about it, he'd been easygoing as they reviewed their answers and hypotheses together. It was natural to think he'd already enacted a plan.

But he shouldn't have had any time to spare…

He'd probably come to this conclusion after quelling the tribal conflict. There hadn't been much time between then and now for him to make any plans.

And Wein's move had actually been a simple one. "What? It's no biggie. I just wrote Marquis Antgadull a letter."

"A letter…?"

"Yeah, a little something that says a certain high-ranking aristocrat will be heading toward her mansion after completing their stay in our Kingdom of Natra."

Lowellmina adopted a look of surprise and concern. "…What's that supposed to do? That's nothing."

"Which is the best approach. It's crude and sloppy, and that's why he'll

bite. He won't be able to help it. The idea is to make him think he's got no reason to fight—since you're falling right into his lap. He might invade Natra if you're here, but that won't be the case. Especially since Marquis Antgadull is the type of guy who likes taking the path of least resistance."

"……"

"You've got it right that I don't want to be bossed around by the West. But I don't plan on going to war with Antgadull over it, either. Sorry, but I suggest you think of another way to stop the rebellion."

Lowellmina was seriously racking her brain.

If she couldn't make Antgadull rise up in revolt at the right time, her plan would collapse. That said, it wouldn't do her any good to send him another letter claiming that the first message was all a mistake. After all, it was known that she was here on official business. Plus, with their return to the Empire fast approaching, any letter that was sent now wouldn't reach its destination before her departure.

Even the original trip to Natra had been a near impossible request. If she expressed her wishes to extend her stay, she knew the majority of her envoys would be against it. And that would be tricky to override.

"I see. I didn't anticipate my plans being thwarted. What a surprise. Well, if you've actually stopped me, that is."

Lowellmina knew that those odds were slim.

She hadn't realized that he'd investigated the son, the current Marquis Antgadull, while also researching his predecessor. Even if she had, she still would have thought the same thing.

She had confidence that her plan would be fulfilled.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Ninym burst through that door in a panic to tell you of an enemy invasion."

But when it came to confidence, Wein didn't fall far behind.

"Nah, won't happen," he proclaimed loudly. "Let's make a bet. I say Antgadull's army won't make a move!"

Just when he'd finished, there was a dynamic *bang!* and the door flew open.

"——Your Highness!" Ninym kneeled before Wein and Lowellmina in a fluster. "My apologies for interrupting your discussion. I have urgent news…!"

Lowellmina looked at the dumbfounded Wein with a triumphant smile.

“What were you saying? Ah, right… Something about making a bet, right?”

“…No, no, no, no, NO, NO-NO-NO! Wait! Hold up! Just a sec! This has gotta be some sort of mix-up.”

“You never know when to give up, Wein. I’ll be generous enough to collect your debt at a later date. Matters of higher priority take precedence.”

Lowellmina turned to Ninym.

“Well then, Ninym, tell me about Antgadull’s army. Where are they? I’m not completely uninvolved. I believe I have the right to hear.”

Ninym blinked back. “—We have had no reports of military activity.”

““What?””

Ninym took a breath. “The son of Marquis Antgadull, Lord Geralt Antgadull, has just arrived at the palace!”

““Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!”” Wein and Lowellmina let out an astonished shout.

Chapter 5 | A Clash of Opinion

Grinahae Antgadull viewed his position as an Imperial marquis serving the Earthworld Empire as completely involuntary.

My father was pathetic… He played up his role as the wise man, forgetting his pride as a king and giving up his own throne!

Grinahae was a direct descendent of the royal family, destined to be king. And yet, his predecessor—the former king of Antgadull—had offered vassalage to the Empire and consigned his line to the humiliating rank of marquis.

And what has that brought us? The Empire stole half our land. The allied nations see us as traitors. The Imperial nobility snub us as newcomers. This is a titular role with no say in Imperial politics.

These were the seeds his father had sown. And Grinahae was left cleaning up this absurd mess—Grinahae, the person who should by all rights have been in line to be the next King of Antgadull.

If he'd stayed in the alliance and crushed the Empire, Antgadull would have made even greater strides under my rule.

This was Grinahae's ongoing pet theory.

—But children tend not to understand their parent's intentions.

King Antgadull had seen through the fact that his child lacked the wisdom required of a ruler. And that with the fall of the Empire, the Eastern continent would fall into an era of rivaling warlords, and Antgadull would inevitably end with his son's reign.

In truth, Grinahae wasn't doing a stellar job of running the country, even though he'd been left to rule only half of the area his predecessors had administered. The lands had fallen to ruin, and the hearts of his people grew

more and more distant.

That was why King Antgadull had betrayed the alliance and sided with the Empire. He'd brought an end to the Kingdom of Antgadull and allowed it to become a sullied name in the continent's history—all so his son would stand a fighting chance.

After his nation became a vassal to the Empire, the king had made sure they stayed out of Imperial politics. He'd known his son would be eaten alive if the boy ever poked his head into the palace's den of thieves, so he took measures to keep him at a far distance.

But Grinahae took no notice. Which wasn't surprising. If he'd been the type of person to come to this realization on his own, King Antgadull wouldn't have made any of those decisions in the first place.

Then, earlier that summer, an opportunity fell in his lap.

"Lord Grinahae, I have welcome tidings for you…" a man named Owl had said.

They'd been first introduced to each other by a vassal. He'd had initially claimed to be a merchant, but after repeated meetings, he revealed himself to hail from a ruined nation, too. Owl told him the former alliance had been talking about rising up against the Empire once again.

Grinahae had immediately jumped on board. The Kingdom of Antgadull could be restored in its former glory, and then, everything would be right for once. It'd be his time to shine. He believed this with utmost sincerity.

And then he'd declared his support for one of the Imperial Princes as advised by Owl without question. He began to gather weapons under the pretense of preparing for civil war. Though Antgadull's influence in the Gairan State had taken a big hit in the past, it still ran strong. He gathered more and more weapons and soldiers. Everything was going well—or so it seemed.

But this was where his bad habits reared their ugly heads.

—Is this really gonna work out?

Grinahae was said to be a man who had inherited his father's looks and ambitions but none of his courage or resourcefulness. These days, he made no attempt to hide his criticisms of his predecessor, but when his father was alive, he didn't once object to any of his opinions. Antgadull the younger was a coward.

That meant there was no way he'd be able to join this overzealous plan

and keep a level head. In his bouts of anxiety, Grinahae had constantly demanded that Owl tell him the details and probability of success, trying to ease his racing mind. But Owl always sidestepped his inquiries, citing the need for absolute secrecy. This had made Grinahae even more nervous, heightening his suspicions.

He wanted some sort of guarantee—a card up his sleeve that he could use to defend himself should anything happen. It was only natural Grinahae would think that way. It was part of his disposition.

When the news came that Imperial Princess Lowellmina would be visiting the neighboring country of Natra, he couldn't have asked for better timing. She held a claim to the throne; her retinue was scant; Natra had just battled Marden practically the other day; their soldiers had to be exhausted. The princess would be in his possession by midwinter, and the heavy snow would frustrate the advance of responding Imperial troops. Once spring came, their rebellion would begin.

It was a perfect setup. He could have called it divine will.

Since he had been preparing for the revolt, he could dispatch soldiers immediately. All that was left was to set out for Natra under his command.

But all of his activities ground to a halt—when a letter from Natra wound up in his hands.

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In a room of his mansion, Grinahae was glaring at the person across from him and made no attempt to hide his scowl.

"As per your request, here are the names of those participating in our plan, my lord…"

Sitting across the table from him with a reverent expression was his acquaintance Owl. Grinahae had no idea if that was his real name or not, not that he particularly cared. It was more important that this man was his connection to the uprising.

"As you can see, each person on this list is worthy of standing by your side. I leave this with you only because I have utmost faith in your wisdom and insight. To accomplish our goal, we all must observe caution and discipline. I ask that you refrain from any reckless movements…"

"You don't have to tell me! I know!" Grinahae boomed, raising his voice

as he slammed the documents on the desk.

Grinahae had been pestering Owl for info on the members of their plan, and until this very moment, Owl hadn't made any moves that suggested he'd oblige.

But that all changed once Grinahae began organizing his soldiers.

Of course, Owl had been flustered when he realized the target was Imperial Princess Lowellmina, who was currently residing in Natra. Grinahae was confident of their success, but that outcome didn't matter. Owl viewed it as a move that would jeopardize their plans for revolt, which was why he'd sought to curry favor by providing the signature bearing document. But even Grinahae couldn't help but get irritated over this obvious change.

Not to mention he was now dealing with an even bigger problem.

"Enough! Go! I'll make sure the soldiers stay in the territory!"

"…Understood." Owl dragged his feet out of the room, weighed down by his displeasure.

But Grinahae quickly forgot his insolence. On top of that, he gave only a cursory look at the documents that he'd been desperate to obtain before tossing them aside. Instead, he took out a single letter.

The very one he had received from the crown prince of the Kingdom of Natra, as a matter of fact.

The contents were simple: An aristocrat wished to visit the mansion of Marquis Antgadull after their stay in Natra.

To think I'd receive such news…

One would obviously think it was referring to the Imperial Princess Lowellmina.

But he had a few questions: Why did the princess want to visit Antgadull? And why did she go through the crown prince to contact him? There were no clear answers.

But upon scrutinizing the letter enough to pierce through it, he read between the lines that this was of Princess Lowellmina's own volition, and she meant for him to keep it a secret.

In other words, she doesn't want the factions to know about it.

It made sense. She was surrounded by people belonging to each of the Imperial Princes' factions. If she were to send a letter herself, its contents would be censored before she could blink. That's why she went through the crown prince.

Well, that was assuming everything in the letter was true.

I can't see any reason for Princess Lowellmina to want to come here…

He approached it from every angle but it was this point that he couldn't figure out, which was why Grinahae couldn't completely trust the message.

Well, it would be more precise to say that if he'd been more creative with his approach, he might have concluded, mistakenly, that she was trying to outmaneuver the three factions and strengthen her own in the struggle for the throne. But in a brain steeped with misogyny, this thought wouldn't have occurred to him even in his dreams.

Grinahae wanted to believe the letter. If it was all true, Princess Lowellmina would fall right into his hands without any need to send his army. It was a divine blessing that seemed to confirm his fated return as king.

At the same time, it did cross his mind that this was too good to be true. *Oh, what to do?*

He'd hemmed and hawed *for a few days*.

But then his problems resolved in an unexpected way, thanks to the coincidental return of his son Geralt from the Imperial capital.

Geralt Antgadull was the Imperial poster child for wayward sons. He displayed no interest in politics, of course, nor in martial arts or academics. He did nothing all day except escape reality through romance. He'd gotten in trouble for it more than once, and he was the type of person who used his status to get out of it.

Even Grinahae found it shameful. It seriously concerned him that such a lousy son could have come from his loins. But well, a son is a son. Even if he had a bad reputation, Geralt was still his precious successor, and Grinahae was optimistic he would change his ways sooner or later.

He'd heard this son had grown infatuated with Princess Lowellmina. When Geralt had gotten violent with another aristocrat at a soiree, she'd been the one to mediate. He had sent her gifts and letters ever since.

When Geralt found out about the letter to his father, he'd exclaimed, "My feelings have reached the princess at last! She obviously wants to see me!"

Geralt had gone on to claim that her previous unfavorable replies to his advances were no doubt because the princes would see his advances toward the princess as a political threat.

"I must go meet my future wife as soon as possible!" he'd declared before he rushed off without delay.

Even Grinahae was dumbfounded by his son's recklessness. At the same time, he was filled with a sense of *What if?*

If Geralt and Lowellmina were united in marriage, the Antgadulls would become one with the Imperial family. Plus, a future Emperor could be born from their line.

Grinahae had faith in his own ability. But if the rebellion succeeded and the current Empire fell to ruin, a period of warring states was liable to come about. Could he really expand his territory as far as Imperial domain? Thinking about that made his ego deflate.

There's value in waiting until Geralt confirms whether his suspicions are true.

Would they steal Princess Lowellmina from Natra and follow through with their revolt against the Empire?

Or get Princess Lowellmina to marry Geralt and have the Antgadull line become part of the Imperial family?

The scales swayed in Grinahae's heart.

He never realized the scales themselves had been fabricated by two tacticians.

◆◇◆

Grinahae's mansion stood in the center of the large port city of Salude in the Gairan State. It had originally been a villa for the royal family of Antgadull, but they'd surrendered their palace upon declaring vassalage to the Empire and made this mansion their stronghold as new marquis.

Salude was normally a lively place with a prospering fishing industry, but the town was currently packed with Grinahae's soldiers, who caused a ruckus wherever they went. Even when the people appealed to their feudal lord, he didn't particularly care or pay attention to their complaints. The soldiers were effectively under no leadership, and the residents, fearing they would run amuck, held their collective breaths as they locked themselves away in their homes.

Owl had left the mansion, observing the state of the town with side glances and occasionally peeking over his shoulder as he walked down an alley. He finally stopped in front of the door to a small house. He knocked twice, paused for a beat, then rapped on the door three times. It opened

soundlessly, and he slipped inside.

There were a few men dressed in civilian attire, but their demeanor carried a dangerous tension.

“How’d it go, Captain? Any news of Grinahae?”

“The word ‘fool’ was made for him.” Owl *tsk*ed as he looked around at the men.

As his title implied, Owl led the people here. Their goal was the destruction of the Empire. Grinahae didn’t know that hostile forces were secretly gathering under his very nose.

What Owl had told Grinahae was no lie. But he hadn’t exactly told him the full truth, either. Like about his homeland.

“And what about Geralt?”

“According to my men hidden among the servants, he’ll arrive in Natra soon.”

“Guess we won’t be able to stop him… And the investigations into the crown prince and the Imperial Princess?”

One subordinate shook his head. “No good. It’s been tricky getting closer to them…”

“The complete opposite to a certain idiot we know,” Owl spat out with no attempt to hide his scorn, and he looked at all present. “In any case, keep watch over Geralt, the crown prince, and the Imperial Princess. To overthrow the Empire, we can’t even overlook a loose thread.”

““Yes, sir!””

With their new orders, the subordinates began to move. Owl looked west as he watched them go—toward Natra.

Geez, to think the impossible would happen…

The princess’s visit to Natra had ruined their plans, which had gone off without a hitch until that point. Now even Geralt was trying to jump into the maelstrom.

What’s going on in Natra anyway? Owl couldn’t help but wonder.

◆◇◆

“So, you’re the crown prince, huh,” Wein heard the moment he walked into the entrance hall.

There was a man in his late twenties with an entourage of a dozen and a

rotund body that looked like he'd never missed a meal in his life. His weak profile hadn't been chiseled by hardship. His clothes were made of the finest quality fabric and packed with gorgeous ornamentation.

One could say he dripped extravagance—or that he was drowning in it.

"It's the first time we get to meet face-to-face, Prince Wein. I'm the son of Grinahae Antgadull, Geralt."

"…Well, well, well, a warm welcome to you, Lord Geralt," Wein answered monotonously. "I've thought for some time that I'd like to strike up a friendship with you—an important imperial vassal. A pleasure to meet you. But I must admit I'm startled by your visit. What can I help you with?"

Geralt put his enthusiasm on full display as he proclaimed, "I've come for my one and only beloved flower, Princess Lowellmina, of course."

YO, IS THIS GUY SEEEEERIOUS?! Wein involuntarily screeched inside his head.

It went without saying that this was the palace in the Kingdom of Natra. It was the backbone of the national government, run by a conglomerate of important people with Wein at its head. The compound was heavily guarded, of course, and it wasn't a place for unsolicited guests to wander in without notice. On occasion, dignitaries from foreign nations were invited to the palace but not without meticulous arrangements beforehand.

In short, an aristocrat waltzing into the palace with his entourage wasn't just rude. It made people question his sanity.

And to say you're here for Lowa…!

He'd heard from Ninym that Geralt was in love with Lowellmina. There was no question that he'd happened to be home to read Wein's letter to the marquis. That appeared to spark a flame in Geralt that spurred him to arrive at the palace. Which brings us here.

Well, Lowellmina had invited herself, too, on the surface. But her visit had been planned ahead of time. It was nothing compared to this madness.

Dude, I couldn't care less if you snub me, but, like, the least you could do is pretend to respect me!

Since his arrival, Geralt hadn't bothered to put on an air of reverence for Wein. He probably saw himself as equal to Wein or above him. If the Kingdom of Antgadull had retained its independence, he would have been a crown prince, too. It's not hard to imagine why he'd feel this way.

That said, this put Wein in a tough spot, since it set a bad example to

those in the room who respected him as their lord.

"I understand."

Wein decided they needed to take this conversation elsewhere, pronto. He took this opportunity to reassure those around him by putting Geralt in his place, giving him a taste of his own medicine.

"We get blinded by love, according to ancient proverbs…and it seems you couldn't escape its clutches, Lord Geralt."

"Yeah, you're right."

I was being saaaaarcastic! Taaaaake notice! Wein begged.

Geralt went on, dashing his prayers. "And? Where does my princess await, pining for me?"

She's not pining for anyone. Wein held back his thoughts.

"There is no need to hurry, Lord Geralt. You know it takes a while for ladies to get ready. And to meet a man of your caliber? She can't even have a single strand of hair out of place. Be generous with your time. Isn't that what makes or breaks a man?"

"…You're right. Guess I lost my composure for a little there."

Well, more than a little, but there was no reason to point that out.

"I've prepared a room for you to rest for the time being, and we'll have a banquet for the two of you in the evening."

"Don't mind if I do."

As he was escorted away, Geralt strutted around like he owned the place with his attendants in tow. As soon as he watched them disappear, Wein murmured with exhaustion.

"Well then—Ninym."

"Yes. Right this way." She guided him to a nearby room.

No one was there, save the two of them. Wein let a teeny sigh escape his lips.

"WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU COME HERE, GEEEEEEERALT?!" he roared. "Seriously, dude? Who in their right mind would come here?! To the palace?! Of a neighboring kingdom?! When no one invited you?!" Wein wailed.

He shot Ninym a look. "Hey, don't you agree with…?"

He trailed off because Ninym was in the worst mood ever.

"U-um, Ninym…?" Wein asked timidly. His frustrations evaporated in an instant.

She spat back. "…Geralt was looking down on you the entire time."

"Y-yeah, well, he is the heir of an Imperial marquis. It's fine."

"No, it's not," she asserted. There was no room for argument. "There's nothing fine about it."

"……"

If he had a slip of the tongue here, he'd be her next target.

Wein chose his words carefully. "Yeah, you're right. But you shouldn't be angry with him on my behalf, Ninym."

"You've got no right to tell me whom I can be angry with and why."

"*But I do*. You're my heart. And I won't forgive him for monopolizing you."

This made even Ninym look startled. And Wein wasn't just going to let this opportunity slide away.

"Besides, being mad will only make you slip up. Better to think of something that makes you happy."

"…Like what?"

Wein thought for a few seconds. "Like me," he joked.

Ninym adopted a serious expression and spoke quietly. "…Okay."

"R-right on."

Wein could feel her rage subside. She seemed to agree with his point.

As he was overcome with relief, he rested on a nearby chair, and Ninym hopped on his lap like it was perfectly normal.

"…Ninym?"

"Don't mind me."

Which was an unreasonable request, but Ninym was hell-bent on getting her way.

"It was a stroke of luck that their soldiers weren't the ones who arrived. I honestly thought we'd be done for this time," she admitted.

Around the time the two tribes had reconciled, Wein had figured out Lowellmina's objective and sent the letter to the marquis. If Antgadull had set off with his soldiers before it arrived, Wein wouldn't have been able to stop them.

"We were lucky he didn't make the call to mobilize them until the very last minute," she continued as though nothing about this situation was abnormal.

Wein gave up trying to shove her off his lap. "…I imagined he'd be

indecisive until the last possible moment. Even so, I knew we could have been in a tough spot."

"Based on your findings on the King of Antgadull?"

"Right." Wein nodded. "Grinahae Antgadull is a man who runs from decisions, hides from responsibility, and hopes the right answer will drop from the sky to save him. He can't confidently make a judgment call in the face of something that could change the fate of an entire continent… Well, the king sold his nation out to the Empire to save his son, so he's plenty reckless, too."

What a comedic tale. To think the prince of a neighboring nation would understand a father's intentions better than his own son.

But even Wein couldn't grasp what Geralt was thinking.

"What are you going to do? I want to get that jerk out of here as soon as possible," Ninym added.

"If we did that, their army would actually come pay us a visit… One thing on my to-do list is to stop Lowa. I bet she's in a crazed panic in her room right about now."

After Ninym had informed them of Geralt's arrival, Lowellmina and Fyshe returned to her room. With her plan in shreds, she'd been forced to make revisions.

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“Well, Lowa wants us to go against Antgadull. Do you think she’ll try to crash the banquet tonight?”

“No way. She doesn’t have any supporters in the Imperial government. She’d need a reason to accuse Antgadull—like that they’re traitors who tried to kidnap her or something. It won’t suffice for us to engage in our usual squabble with Antgadull.”

“Well, what do you think she’ll do?”

Wein gave a dry smile. “I’m guessing she’ll—”

“I’m going to wrap Geralt Antgadull around my little finger,” Lowellmina declared quietly, facing Fyshe in her room.

“And then, I’m going to bait him with marriage. I’ll get him to provide evidence and testify about the rebellion.”

“I see… Are you sure you want to go through with it?”

“I absolutely don’t,” Lowellmina continued with a sigh. “I knew Geralt was infatuated with me, but I never imagined he’d force his way into this palace. We’ve lost that one. We can’t stick to our original plan, or we’ll incur further losses.”

“I believe the prince’s letter led to this reckless behavior. Are you going to press him on that?”

“I despise that this is going Wein’s way, but I’m sure he has an excuse ready. I’ll leave it be for now. I won’t get anything out of making Natra out to be a villain.”

After all, her top priority was to stop a rebellion set to wreak havoc across the entire Eastern continent. And that wouldn’t change, no matter what.

“I imagine Wein is going to try to get Geralt and me to make contact at the banquet.”

“Are you saying you’ll cooperate with the prince?”

“Well, yes. Our interests intersect on that point. But,” Lowellmina continued, “anything that happens afterward is a separate matter. I’ll win Geralt over and spur him on. And then—”

“There’s more to Lowa’s plan,” Wein stated.

Ninym tilted her head quizzically. “More…after she stops the revolt?”

“That’s right. The thing she’s actually after… The throne.”

Ninym appeared more confused than surprised. She knew Lowellmina was a true patriot, and she could understand why the princess would go to such great lengths, using herself as bait to save the Empire.

But becoming Empress was a different story.

“It’ll be tough to make that happen.”

“That’s why we’re in this situation. Listen,” Wein went on. “Lowa planned to bait Antgadull into attacking Natra. That way, she could make Antgadull out to be the bad guys and beat them, forcing the marquis to cough up the details of the revolt. They would be back to square one… But consider it from an outsider’s point of view. Wouldn’t it look like Natra was siding with Lowa?”

Surprise flashed across Ninym’s face. They might just be fending off oncoming danger, but it would *look* like they were joining forces with the Imperial Princess.

“But even if we were her allies, her bid for the throne…”

“…won’t change. We don’t have the power to meddle with their internal affairs. But we’d show the Empire she has backers. Plus, she could display her undaunted resourcefulness in outmaneuvering the princes and saving the Empire. Any of these things on their own wouldn’t make much of a splash. But together, it’s a whole different story. Don’t you agree?”

“……” She did.

Those who hadn’t taken any notice of her would start to pay attention. That wasn’t hard to imagine. And if Lowellmina showed the makings of an Empress, there would be some who would abandon the three princes and align themselves with her.

“…But her plan failed. If she wins over Geralt, Antgadull would have no reason to fight.”

“Right… That’s why I’m guessing she’s going the opposite route.”

“What do you mean…?”

Wein grinned.

“—And with Geralt’s own hand, I’ll bring Grinahae Antgadull to heel.”

Fyshe’s eyes widened in fear. “Your Imperial Highness. What in the

world are you…?”

“It’ll be possible to stop the rebellion with Antgadull as our ally. But let’s say I want to include them as a force behind my bid for the throne. Their past involvement in the scheme to revolt wouldn’t do me any favors. I need their slate to be wiped clean.”

“And you’ll have Geralt attack his own father?” Fyshe trembled.

Lowellmina nodded casually.

“Here’s the setup. Geralt has known about his father’s scheme the entire time, and he just so happens to receive an invite from the Imperial Princess, beckoning him to visit her in a neighboring nation. There, he confides in her about the terrible plot. When this is brought to her attention, the two overpower the traitor together. That’s basically it.”

Fyshe moaned as multiple thoughts raced through her mind.

This was Lowellmina they were talking about. She could probably pull it off and win over Geralt to have things go according to plan.

But there was one problem.

“Your Highness, our numbers are scant, and their entourage is small. To subjugate Antgadull…”

“It’s insufficient.” Lowellmina flashed a brilliant smile. “So, let’s borrow some soldiers from Natra.”

“Which is what she’s scheming, and IT AIN’T FUNNY!” Wein screamed.

“Yeah, it would be a huge pain for the West to boss me around after the fall of the Empire. Let’s say I wouldn’t mind helping if it meant avoiding that outcome for argument’s sake. I still wouldn’t sign up to fight for the throne. I’ve got zero interest in mobilizing my forces.”

“More like we’re coming up short on cash.”

The expenses from the recent war with Marden weighed heavily on them. If this turned into a battle with Antgadull, they’d burn through their treasury until there was nothing left but ash.

“All right. Our plan is to support her scheme to deceive Geralt without letting her corner me into sending soldiers to get Antgadull.”

“Sounds like a tough conversation.”

“Well, it’ll work out somehow. You follow up with the vassals. I bet

they're confused by Geralt's arrival, especially when I was supposed to be discussing marriage with Lowa. And get his entourage drunk enough to reveal any useful information. Like about his personality."

"Understood. I'll take care of it."

Wein nodded and looked up above with nonchalance.

"Which is what Wein is thinking. But that won't do. I must have his army at all costs."

"Should we take advantage of Lord Geralt?"

"Yes. I think it's paramount I establish relations with him. Especially if he is to inherit Antgadull—or become my husband. I know Wein will try to exploit him by any means possible. And I'll catch him off guard."

Lowellmina looked at Fyshe. "I'll take care of this. I'm certain my brothers' vassals in my delegation are in a panic right now, and I'd like you to silence them."

"Leave it to me."

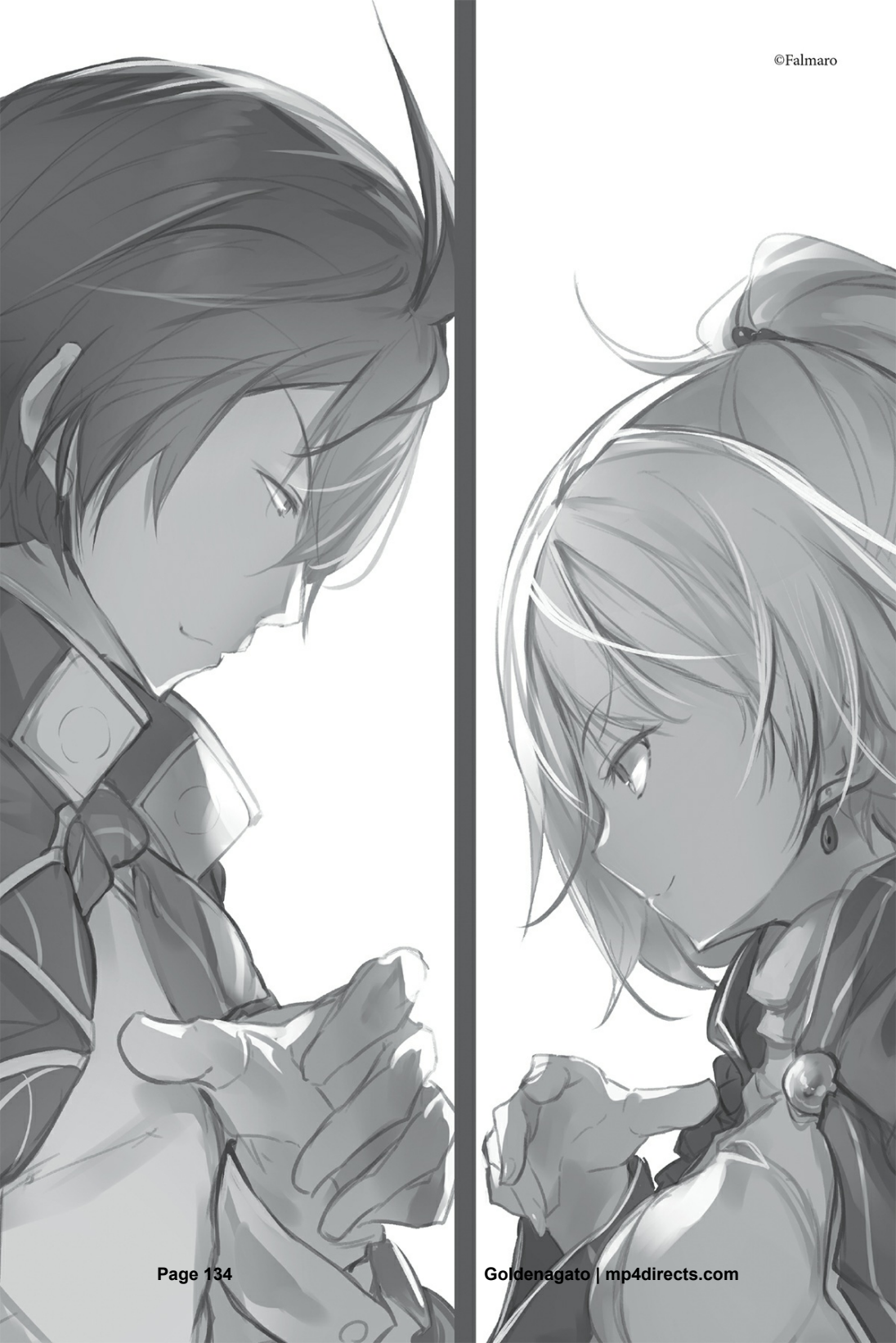
Lowellmina nodded and quietly closed her eyes.

Damn, that sneaky chick got me wrapped up in her humongous mess.

I thought I had him perfectly cornered, but he managed to evade me. As I'd expect of Wein.

But—

And yet—



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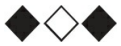
* * *

—I'll be the last one laughing!

Two tacticians headed toward the banquet assured of victory.
Soon, it would become clear which of the two was sorely mistaken—



"—Marvelous, Lord Geralt. What insight."

"It's to our great loss that you haven't taken center stage at the Empire, Sir Geralt."

"Come on now, bwa-ha-ha."

The moon rose high in the night. Among the guests at the banquet, Geralt was living the high life sandwiched between Wein, the crown prince of Natra, and Lowellmina, the Imperial Princess of the Empire.

"To hear that from a prince and a princess. Stop it. I'm blushing."

Right now, they were carrying out Phase One of their respective strategies: Wein and Lowellmina would work together to butter up Geralt and get him all loose.

"That's all you've got to say?" Wein chuckled in an easygoing way. "I'm just voicing the truth. I don't shower others with false flattery and florid speech when they have nothing to show for it. I'm a man of my word and proud of it."

Oh, how insincere. Lowellmina's glare pierced through Wein, but he ignored it, of course.

"He's right." This time, Lowellmina flashed a fleeting smile. "Though you've become one of the great pillars that uphold the Empire, you carry the blood of the royal family of Antgadull. With your lineage, we'll always come up short with our words."

Who do you think you are? Wein's eyes darted around, but Lowellmina paid him no mind.

"Ha-ha-ha. Okay, you got me there."

Everything was going according to plan.

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Geralt was all smiles upon being praised by those of Wein and Lowellmina's caliber.

And of course, he didn't feel an ounce of distrust. Compare his ego to a container: Right now, their golden words were filling it to the brim, flowing as freely as alcohol.

On the other hand, those in attendance assumed complicated expressions. There were Geralt's servants and a few from the Imperial delegation, along with the vassals of the Kingdom of Natra who were hosting them. While his servants were pleased to see Geralt in a fine mood, they were confused by the way the two extolled him.

The Imperial delegation was more than a little concerned and oozed discomfort.

Though Fyshe had spoken with them beforehand, she couldn't reveal all of Lowellmina's schemes since the envoys were loyal to the Imperial Princes. She could only say that with Geralt's arrival, it had been decided that princess and prince would receive him together.

That made it seem as though he'd had interrupted official business. And even though the Imperial Princess had graciously received him in the face of his insolence, they couldn't believe that he'd be this disrespectful to her. They were about to explode in fury.

Of course, they couldn't say anything since he was the son of a marquis, but they all thought him to be a terrible blight on the reputation of Imperial nobility.

The vassals of Natra hadn't been told the truth, either. Wein figured it would be a big nuisance if they found out Lowellmina was trying to throw them into war. But they weren't as lost as the Imperial delegation. They all trusted Wein, and their goal was to follow his orders and act as hospitable as possible.

Which is why as the banquet progressed, their surroundings began to fill with whispers: "What's going on?" or "I have no idea…"

But this was white noise to Geralt, because a pair of masterminds were keeping him busy. This was the obvious outcome; though, this dream team was only cooperating to dupe Geralt, and once they reached Phase Two of their plans, all bets were off. Wein and Lowellmina started to snap at each other's heels in their fight to take the lead.

"Our Kingdom of Natra is delighted to aid in your meeting. I'm certain

your father, Marquis Antgadull, will be pleased to hear the news," Wein would say.

"Well," Lowellmina would respond. "Then he'd ask us to hurry home. But this is a fated encounter, Sir Geralt. Wouldn't you want to keep this between us, to enjoy our company alone?" She whispered in his ear.

To translate this to layman's terms:

"Tell Grinahae and get him to call off his army, pronto."

"I can't let you do that. I'll keep stalling until Grinahae loses it."

Of course, Geralt didn't catch that at all. With a brain soaked in alcohol and hardly ever exercised, he took their words literally.

And since they both understood this, a war of wits commenced.

"Princess Lowellmina, if you're to be married, this would be a serious affair in Antgadull—much less the Empire. I would imagine this news would assure your subjects during their time of need. Isn't it the duty of the royal family to release an official statement as soon as possible?"

(Translation: Just team up with Antgadull and crush the revolt already.)

"But it would pain me to leave Natra without repaying you for your kindness. Would you care to join us in the Empire, Prince Wein? We would welcome you with open arms as the one who brought us together."

(Translation: I'll think about it if you announce that Natra is backing us?)

"Thank you. But I must remain to protect this nation in my father's stead. I understand your position as a member of the Imperial family, but I cannot abandon my own."

(Translation: I ain't going nowhere. Figure out how to be Empress yourself.)

"I see… Well, we can announce it via letter as early as today. I can just picture the surprised look on the faces of my brothers and Marquis Grinahae."

(Translation: You want me to expose your *letter?)*

"In that case, I'll put in a good word as well. If it's for the future marquis and his wife, I will gladly be of help."

(Translation: Whaaat? I have no idea what you're talking about!)

The conversation between the two continued for some time, but it changed course without notice.

"Your Highness, please forgive my interruption." Ninym quietly handed Wein documents from behind. "These require your confirmation."

Wein scanned the papers. On the surface, they appeared to be your average business reports. It'd be no problem if others laid eyes on these documents.

On the pages were a code that only Wein and Ninym could decipher.

"Excuse me for a moment. Please enjoy each other's company in the meantime."

Lowellmina took the opportunity to launch her attack on Geralt. Wein deciphered the pages as he listened to her, reading the reports on Geralt that he'd asked from Ninym.

Hmm, let's see. "I've confirmed that Geralt's return to Antgadull was no coincidence…" Holy shit. Seriously?

Wein instinctively looked at Ninym for confirmation as he processed this unexpected development. She nodded to indicate that it was no joke.

Okay, but what does it mean if it's not an accident…?

He was befuddled but continued to read, and Geralt's life story unfolded before his eyes.

Geralt Antgadull was born the eldest son of an Imperial marquis and grew up lacking nothing. While in his family's territory, he experienced no agony or conflict or frustrations or regret. Like a carriage on a paved road, his life was one smooth journey from point A to point B.

But that all changed when he reached the capital. He'd been sheltered by privilege all his life until he became the target of merciless scorn—as Antgadull the Traitor.

For someone who'd been coddled since the day he was born, this stressed Geralt out beyond belief. And as a result, he'd turned to alcohol and love affairs, dripping gold and jewels, and surrounding himself with yes men. He'd gained a notorious reputation as a prodigal son, even in the Empire.

And then he had a chance encounter with Lowellmina at a certain soiree. He'd tried to get her attention many times thereafter.

If this was love at first sight, the situation could have been salvaged. But the truth was way different. Geralt had known she was popular and thought he'd be accepted if he could win her affections. He'd desired Lowellmina out of a subconscious inferiority complex.

But his unwholesome advances would never capture her heart, and she'd continued to coldly evade him. Soon, he became furious. How dare she dismiss the eldest son of a marquis—Imperial Princess or not? Did she think

he'd let this nonsense slide?

Upon hearing the news of her visit to Natra, Geralt couldn't keep his rage in check, exploding in a fit of anger. On the surface, she was enjoying a trip abroad, but Geralt had heard it was to discuss marriage with their prince. He whipped every one of his servants bloody and cursed Lowellmina to the extent that he would have been arrested for insulting the Imperial family had he not been the son of a marquis.

And then he had returned to Antgadull from the Imperial capital.

Why?

To attack Lowellmina's entourage on their way home from Natra.

BWAH?! Wein spurted internally as soon as he read this. *Is this for real…?*

He immediately turned to Ninym, who calmly nodded. Her cheek twitched slightly, which must have been because she hadn't expected Geralt would take things to the extreme.

Even Wein never expected the son of a marquis to plan an attack on the Imperial Princess over petty personal resentment. Based on what he read, it made complete sense for Geralt to act this way. He believed Lowellmina had betrayed him, and he wouldn't be at ease until he made her understand by his own hand—until justice was served.

But that had changed with the letter in question.

After Geralt had read it, he'd bawled his eyes out without care of being seen by others.

"Ohhhhhhh, I knew I could trust her. She's finally understood my feelings."

The fact that he'd once cursed her was wiped from his mind. Taking its place was the image of his wife, Lowellmina, by his side as he was blessed by the citizens of the Empire.

Which is why he told his father he was going to Natra and rushed off to collect her.

……I see. Wein gave a small sigh as he finished reading the documents. *He's seriously bonkers…*

He recoiled in disgust.

He'd thought Geralt was a bit odd, but this. This was something else. If there'd been anyone else Wein could have used otherwise, he would have done so without question.

What a cruel trick of fate. To think that he had to work out a way to tie the knot between this guy and his friend, Lowellmina—

Well, whatever.

Without a second of hesitation, Wein found his solution. *My needs come first. Plus, Lowa put half of this on herself! She brought this on herself!*

If the person in question could hear his thoughts, her face would twitch, no doubt.

Wein stared at Lowellmina as if to provoke her. *Besides, if you can't even control this guy, you can kiss your dreams of becoming Empress goodbye, Lowa.*

She must have felt his gaze, because she cracked a small smile.

Unlike Wein, Lowellmina had no pawns to investigate Geralt for her, but she must have grasped his temperament from their time at the Imperial capital. She knew she couldn't deal with him using normal methods.

And even then, she knew she could get him to do as she wished. She'd show them all. Her smile was one of confidence and pride.

But that was when the subject of their war of wills spoke up, upon noticing Wein and Lowellmina communicating with each other in silence.

"…Oh yeah, the two of you sent me that letter. Are you two old acquaintances?" Geralt asked, a dark jealousy brewing in his voice.

The duo picked up on this. In fact, they expected him to harbor resentment, meaning they weren't fazed in the least.

"Yeah, from when I was studying abroad in the Empire. But wow. What a shame. If I'd known you at the time, Lord Geralt, I would have struck up a friendship with you." Wein weaved in the truth with lies.

Geralt gave a small nod. "…Huh. I spent a long time in the capital, but I hadn't heard any rumors of you, Prince Wein. How did you spend your days there?"

If he'd been stupid honest and said that he'd faked his identity to attend the military academy and ranked top of his class, Geralt would have twisted his face past its limits.

Wein spoke in half-truths. "I wanted to immerse myself in the arts, but there was so much for me to learn in the Empire. I spent much of my time in a mansion there. The only form of entertainment I had came from swinging my sword."

If that were true, it wouldn't be unnatural for Geralt not to have heard of

him. But in an unexpected turn of events, Geralt latched on to something.

"Huh… You're good with a sword?"

"…Well, I have a modicum of familiarity."

Wein felt that this might take a turn for the worse but had no time to stop Geralt from pressing on.

"What a coincidence. I'm quite confident in my swordsmanship."

You've gotta be kidding. It only took a moment for Wein and Lowellmina to come to the same conclusion.

Well, everyone in the room would have the same realization. Based on his body, muscle mass, footwork, and everything else, he had to be far from a swordsman.

Then why would he fib?

He's pissed about me and Lowa being buddy-buddy. He's probably plotting to beat me in a sword fight and put me in my place, Wein guessed.

If that was the goal, anyone would say he should have picked a different challenge. But Geralt hadn't chosen sword fighting at random.

They had no idea that Geralt glowed with satisfaction when he won against his own servants on a regular basis. Well, it was more like he was unaware that his servants struggled on the daily to think of the best ways to be defeated—all to avoid invoking his wrath.

In any case, Geralt wasn't lying when he said he was skilled with the sword. At least, he didn't think he was.

Geez. What do I do? Wein's eyes latched onto Lowellmina.

She responded with her own look of shock. *You've no choice but to give him a decent fight. Appease him.*

Um, I'm sorry. A "decent" battle? That's the hard paaaaaaart.

I'll cheer you on. Woo-hoo. You can do it. Let's go. Lowellmina was looking rather composed, since she was just going to spectate.

Damn you, Wein cursed.

"So? What do you say? Let's demonstrate our swordsmanship before Princess Lowellmina," Geralt proclaimed.

His declaration riled the room. Of course, it did. Both Geralt and Wein were important figures. If either of them got hurt, it'd be a humongous problem.

"Your Highness…" Ninym took a step forward from behind him.

Wein held her back with a hand. "Not to worry. This will be a good show.

The wooden swords," he commanded, shedding his coat and taking one.

He stood in the center of the hall. The vassals and servants nearby scurried away to make room.

Geralt faced him with a sword of his own. "And the rules of the game?"

"Whoever drops their sword first, loses."

They faced each other as they both adopted a stance.

This was when everyone was certain of Wein's victory.

It wasn't because of nepotism. His opponent was unstable on his feet, trembling in place. Compared to that, Wein's breaths, gaze, and sword were steady, making the difference between their abilities crystal clear.

But the two fighters were thinking about other things entirely.

I'll have the prince act as my foil. Geralt was certain of his own victory.

All right, gonna wrap this up with minimal damage. Wein was busy plugging away, thinking about their reputations and what might follow afterward. *I need to let Geralt have all the glory if I want my plan to work, but I have a name to live up to, too. I can't let myself lose without a scuffle.*

Which meant his best target was—the wooden sword in Geralt's hands. His grip was weak, and it'd be easy to knock away. Wein would let go of his sword at the same time as Geralt. It'd be a tie.

That's why he had established those rules as the condition for victory.

If I'm being honest, he's so sloshed he can't swing that sword around. I bet he'll get pooped. I'll get him out of breath in a few strikes and then make my move.

With his plan in stone, things were set into motion.

"HYAAAAH!" Geralt hollered as he kicked off the ground, as though he was no longer able to stand the silence, springing toward Wein.

There was nothing deliberate about his swings as he rushed in. It'd be easy to counter, but it wasn't the victory that he needed.

"Heh—"

The wooden swords clashed, and a dry thud echoed through the hall.

Then twice. Three times in succession.

Wein analyzed Geralt's movements and sword position as he pretended to be pushed back.

In time, his opponent's breaths became labored and his charge weakened, just as Wein had expected. The moment had come. Wein took a breath, calculated his timing and—

———*Now!*

He charged.

Geralt tripped up over his legs.

“Whaaaaat?”

Was it because he was drunk or was he pushed down by the force of his opponent?

The answer was unclear.

Geralt lost his balance as if in perfect synchrony with Wein’s charge.

He pitched forward, his head drooped, and oddly enough, it propelled toward the sword that Wein had swung with the intent of knocking out Geralt’s weapon from his hands.

HEY NOOOOOOOOOOW! Wein screamed internally. At this rate, Geralt’s head would become a ghastly work of art that no one would dare to look upon twice.

NOOOOOOOOOOO! TUUUUUUUUUUURN! Wein focused all his strength in his arms.

And responding to his muscles and prayers, the wooden sword miraculously shifted its trajectory, skimmed past Geralt’s face, and smashed into the sword in his loose fist.

A dull sound and a sharp shrill overlapped each other. One thud when Geralt fell over, and the other when his sword clattered to the ground. Wein stood frozen in place after he followed through with his swing. He slowly broke from his stance and dropped his sword.

Cheers erupted around him.

From an outside perspective, it seemed like a perfect victory for Wein.

Since Geralt’s rep was shot from the beginning, even the Imperial delegation was clapping—joining the vassals of Natra, who’d been rooting for him from the get-go.

Wein was being showered with applause, and Lowellmina was spectating. Both were thinking to themselves:

HOLY CRAAAAAAP! I FRIGGIN’ WOOOOOOOOON!

WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU DO THAAAAAT?!

Their silent screams were in unison.

Because he’d been using all his strength to change the trajectory of the sword, he hadn’t been able to let go as planned when they clashed against each other.

Which meant he didn't have the chance to make it a tie.

M-maybe I can trick them by dropping the sword now…? Wein tried this petty trick, but the public wasn't buying it.

All the gears in his head turned as he scrambled to find something else to do.

"Your Highness!" Ninym called out.

Wein whipped around, and there, face full of shame and rage, was Geralt. He'd picked up his fallen sword, attempting to rush Wein.

—Oh, crap.

In that moment, Wein panicked over the surprise attack—well, he might have, if he was someone else. Wein could defend himself with his own sword, easy. But it'd do more damage to Geralt, who was acting like a coward for hounding Wein despite his indisputable defeat. It'd be incredibly difficult for Geralt to save face.

I could defend. But that won't change the fact that he attacked me. Parrying would do the same. In any case, I've got no choice but to avoid him. And naturally, to make it appear as though I'm not dodging—!

Could he do it?

He had no other option.

Wein waited until just before Geralt closed in, calculated the attack with all his heart and soul—

And he dodged it, spinning to face him as though they'd just passed by each other.

It's perfect——!

He could insist that Geralt had just tripped and eaten dirt as he went to pick up his sword. Wein made eye contact with Geralt directly across from him.

Apologies for disclosing this information this late in the game, but it's integral to mention that the banquet was being held on the second floor.

And while they were fighting, the two had moved precariously close to the walls.

And of course, the walls had windows, as they often do.

And Geralt plunged right into one.

"Ah," Wein said.

The windowpane shattered into pieces in an ear-splitting collision.

"Oh," Lowellmina said in surprise.

Geralt didn't just break the window with his momentum. His upper half went right through the frame.

""Wai—"" the duo raised their voices, watching his bottom half slowly rise—

And he slid out of the window.

They heard a weighty thump against the ground.

"_____"

Everyone in the room stood frozen in shock upon witnessing this scene.

Ninym was the first one to instantly respond and recover enough to move. She'd been hanging out in the back and pushed her way through the crowd, gripping onto the window frame and leaping down. Jumping from the second floor was nothing to her.

And then in order, Wein, Lowellmina, and the servants clambered to the window in a fluster and peered over its ledge.

"S-Sir Geralt?!"

"Ninym! Is he okay?!"

With everyone watching, Ninym fell to her knees beside Geralt, who was stretched out on the ground, and checked his condition. A few moments passed before she gave a grim look.

"Well. I don't know what to say." She looked up at the two and spoke nervously. "I'm terribly sorry—but he has passed on."

Wein and Lowellmina turned to stare at each other in perfect sync.

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Chapter 6 | Double Ingenuity

It was the day after the banquet.

A gloomy vibe hung over the entire office.

The source of it all was Wein, who was splayed out on his desk, oozing misery. To his side was Ninym, whose face was plastered with a pained look.

"…Hey, Ninym," he called out, face firmly planted on his desk.

"Yes?"

"Hear me out. Let's say, for example, that the son of an aristocrat from the country next door was beckoned to our kingdom by a letter that's super suspect."

"Uh-huh."

"And that he died there."

"Uh-huh."

"How would it look to everyone else?"

Ninym paused for a beat. "Like he was assassinated. Without question."

"I *KNEW* IIIIIIIIIIIIT!" Wein howled, snapping his head up and banging his hands against his desk.

"Like, come on! Why?! Why'd you have to die, Geralt?! You get all riled up with envy and challenge me to a sword fight—that you have no chance of winning, at that! And then you try to take out your anger on me for losing—by launching a friggin' surprise attack! But that somehow leads to you fall out of a window…and snap your neck? You—you're impossible! Come oooooon!"

"He really just up and died, huh…"

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“And I’m probably next! Our plan didn’t just fall through—it’s in smithereens! At this rate, we’ll probably be at war with Antgadull, not to mention the Empire!”

Which made sense, since Geralt had been the child of Marquis Antgadull, a well-known household in the Empire—honest-to-goodness nobility.

Considering how Geralt had died in a foreign country that had requested his presence, the two forces had more than enough justification to invade them.

“Oh, why… Why did it turn out this way…? I just wanted to butter him up and get him to go home with Lowellmina…” Wein moaned to himself, as if casting a curse, and buried his face in his hands.

Even Ninym sympathized. How could they have predicted the tables would turn?

But they couldn’t leave the situation as is.

“I promise to listen to your rants when this is over. But right now, we have to switch gears. Let’s think of a plan from here on out,” she reasoned with him.

“Guuurgh…” He let out a loud grunt like a wandering spirit before pulling himself out of his melancholy look. “—First things first. I don’t think the Empire will make a move anytime soon.”

“Agreed. Right now, they’re divided into the three factions in the fight for the throne. They don’t have the leeway to invade Natra immediately.”

“Then there’s Marquis Antgadull… Have we secured the servants that accompanied Geralt?”

“Secured and placed under house arrest, for the most part. But we’re missing two of them. According to the testimonies of the other servants, those two were new hires.”

“Quick on their feet for servants of that moron…”

“Do you think news of his death will promptly reach his father?”

“The odds are high. Plus, Lowellmina’s envoys are eyewitnesses. They’ll want to report his death back to the homeland. And it’s not like we can place them under house arrest, too. Which means Marquis Antgadull will hear about it sooner or later. But,” Wein went on, “he won’t act right away after he finds out. I’m gonna bet he’ll waste time thinking, debating, fretting over the motives of his son’s assassination.”

“And he’d never guess that it was an accidental death. Not in a million

years."

"Yeah, no shit! Me neither! AAAAAAAAAAA," Wein wailed.

Ninym attempted to pacify him. "There, there. Relax. We've got to take action before then."

"You're right…" Wein heaved a huge sigh. "My thoughts, Lowa's thoughts, Antgadull's thoughts, and everything in between… It's all a jumbled mess right now. Whoever takes the initiative will gain a huge advantage. In other words, the playing field is even…!"

"More like we're all backed into a tight corner."

"Shut it! Don't be all doom and gloom. I know hindsight is twenty-twenty. But if I stay in the lead, I've got a good shot making those conspirators sorry… I think…!"

A knock came at the door of the office. The official in charge of hosting the Imperial delegation appeared in front of them.

"Pardon me, Your Highness. Princess Lowellmina has just requested an emergency meeting."

HGWAAAAAAAAAA?! Wein was about to internally burst into tears.

"What do you wish to do?"

"……We can't refuse a request from the princess. Bring her here."

"Understood." The official departed, clicking the door closed from behind.

A few moments of silence passed between them.

Ninym whispered, "And she's taken the lead."

"NNGHAAAAAAAAAAA!" Wein yowled. "This is *real* bad! I haven't figured out what she's up to…!"

"Maybe she'll lodge a formal complaint against you for letting Imperial nobility die on your watch?"

"Possible. And if she does, I bet she'll toss in a few of her own demands…"

But Wein's thoughts didn't race fast enough because another knock came at the door before he could reach a conclusion.

"Princess Lowellmina has arrived."

Damn it all! You could have taken your tiiiiime! He mentally berated the official.

Lowellmina came in and bowed toward Wein. "Apologies for taking time out of your busy day."

"…There isn't a single door in Natra that's closed off to you, Princess," Wein replied with a stiff smile. "But we've been dealing with the incident from last night. I would appreciate if we could keep this brief."

He'd find his move while he kept her in check. Wein was fueled by sheer determination.

Give it to me. Give it to me good. I vow to myself that I'll fend you off…!

He couldn't let Lowellmina take the lead here. He didn't know what her demands would involve, but it didn't matter because he'd turn them down. That was the only answer.

"I'll keep it short." Lowellmina cleared her throat.

Wein steadied his breath.

"I surrender."

"—I'm sorry, *what?*" Wein couldn't stop a discomposed squeak from coming out of his lips.

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"Geralt…is…dead…?"

Grinahae dropped the documents in his hands when news from his steward registered in his brain.

"Wh…What?! Why'd he have to die?!"

"U-um, Sir Geralt's servant just rushed in and informed us that he fell to his death at the palace in Natra…"

"Don't be ridiculous! This must be a mistake!"

"That's what I thought…until they gave me this…" The steward passed a dagger to Grinahae.

He'd never mistake its inlaid jewels.

"According to the servant, who just barely escaped, all other members of his entourage were captured by Natra soldiers…"

Grinahae felt as if his legs might give way. He placed his hands on the desk nearby to steady himself.

He spoke in a tight voice. "Where is that servant now…?"

"Resting to recover from extreme weakness. They haven't had anything to eat since fleeing Natra, after all…"

"…I understand. Ask for the full details when they're up. And leave me be. I need to think alone for a while. Don't let anyone come near this room."

"Yes sir…" The steward slunk away and left.

When Grinahae was all alone, anguish crawled on his face.

"What's going on…? Why did this…" Grinahae unconsciously let spill from his lips.

These questions had taken control of his heart.

Geralt was dead. He'd died in foreign territory.

From illness…? From an accident…? No.

Geralt had been assassinated. Of that, there was no question.

Then why? Why did they have to kill him?

It all started with that letter. It was a trick to lure him out!

After finding out Geralt had fallen in love with Princess Lowellmina, the enemy had timed the letter to arrive when he was back at the mansion and lured him. In other words, it had all been a scheme by Natra. The fact they had captured his servants was proof. It had to be to silence them.

Why did Natra need to kill him?

They could've held a grudge against him… But would they go this far? I mean, we're Imperial nobility…and he's my kid—the son of a marquis.

Call him out and assassinate him? That'd be reckless.

Even if they could keep the servants silent for now, the truth would come out eventually. It was tantamount to picking a fight with the Empire.

That's when Grinahae realized something. *Yeah. My son was murdered. That's enough reason to invade. Then, Princess Lowellmina will be…*

Grinahae was stating his problem in reverse to think through it when a doubt popped into his head.

…What if she knew about this assassination plot the entire time?

After all, though the letter had been sent under the crown prince's name, its contents were written according to her will. If the prince hadn't worked alone but sent the letter with her permission…that would mean they were conspiring together.

Why would the Imperial Princess and crown prince join forces to assassinate an Imperial aristocrat?

"——No way." Grinahae's body shivered with premonition.

They must have…caught on to our rebellion.

To him, this was the worst possible scenario.

Lowellmina couldn't possibly know everything. If she'd discovered the entirety of their scheme, she wouldn't act in this roundabout way. That said,

the smidgen of intel she had must have continued his involvement. That was when she'd started sketching out a plan, making a deal with the crown prince to lure Geralt. And from there, they'd tried to get him to spill the details about the revolt.

And if they killed him…that means they've gotten what they wanted… How much did Geralt know…?

When it came to the revolt, even Grinahae hadn't said a peep to any third parties—not even his own son. But there was a possibility that Geralt had seen the soldiers and weapons that his father was collecting. He must have felt something was amiss. If Geralt had known the full details and disclosed them, then they couldn't waste time fighting Natra. There was a chance that the Empire had received news and dispatched their troops to confront him.

Get a move on and put up our defenses… Wait. Or think of an excuse…? Or maybe I should capture the princess? …Um… But…

His thoughts whirled around in his head, but he couldn't come to a conclusion as he felt impending doom weigh heavily on him.

The situation had completely pushed Grinahae beyond his limits.

With no choice but to think of something, he continued wandering through a mental maze that had no exit.

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"What in the world…!"

Grinahae hadn't been the only one to receive news of Geralt's death.

There was a servant who'd escaped captivity—sent secretly by Owl. It was one of his underlings, and this information had just now reached his ears.

"Geralt died, huh… Shit. At a time like this."

"The crown prince and Geralt were demonstrating their swordsmanship for Princess Lowellmina when he passed on, but…"

"I'm guessing he was assassinated? Though there's a good probability it was an accident."

"It has to be more than that. Not even Geralt would be stupid enough to just up and die in a foreign country."

But if that was the case, what was their motive?

Of course, Owl reached the same question as Grinahae—though unlike the marquis, he knew there was something more important than finding the

right answer.

If Natra and Antgadull go to war, it'll attract all eyes and ears. Our scheme to rebel isn't complete. We must avoid any unwanted attention.

Owl ran through the possibilities and arrived at a decision.

"—Tell everyone. We're switching strategies."

Before Lowellmina had headed to Wein's office, she'd faced Fyshe and groaned.

"This is a problem…"

She'd been planning to use Geralt to drag Natra into her schemes and accuse Marquis Antgadull of high treason. But that ploy had been smashed into a million pieces. Wein wasn't the only one clutching his head and lamenting that all hope had been dashed.

"Fyshe, are you absolutely positive that he's dead?"

"Yes… I inspected the body myself. There is no mistake or doubt about the cause. He snapped his neck. Instant death."

"I see… Which makes me think he hasn't been assassinated. It was clearly an accident." Lowellmina exhaled long and slow.

Fyshe had on a grave look. "With all due respect, Your Highness, we should consider returning home for the time being."

The princess's gaze sharpened, but Fyshe did not falter.

"Our plan has been on thin ice since the very beginning. For it to work, we had to guarantee that no one knew of this scheme. But the prince saw through it, and our plan to use Lord Geralt has amounted to nothing. While your brothers' vassals may be shaken by his death, they will be suspicious if you try to extend your stay. I advise against forming any new strategies here. It will only bring more trouble."

Her argument was sound.

They'd been able to convince the delegation to remain in Natra by citing Geralt's death, but most had no idea why he'd shown up or why Wein and Lowellmina had both warmly received him. There was no doubt that she'd be the target of their suspicions soon enough.

"I'm aware of your desire to save the Empire and inherit the throne. I know that this plan originally had the biggest potential of realizing it. But—"

"…That opportunity is now lost."

"Yes…" Fyshe nodded with great distress.

Even she was tortured by their situation. Fyshe owed Lowellmina for lifting her out of obscurity after she'd lost her position as ambassador. She'd granted her another opportunity to serve the Empire with her blessing.

And Fyshe was drawn to Lowellmina for fighting for the throne as a woman, especially because she'd slammed into the glass ceiling herself as a successful diplomat. She wanted to aid Lowellmina in overthrowing this whole system.

Plus, the princess's wisdom and love for her nation were absolute. How many members of the Imperial family would willingly place themselves in a foreign country as bait?

If only the plan had worked.

But there was nothing they could do.

"Fixating on our missed prey will only leave you in danger. Let's return to the capital and sketch out our next plan."

In this situation, the safety of the princess took priority. Even if Lowellmina resisted, she would ultimately return safely to their homeland. This was Fyshe's job, and she would make certain that it was carried out.

"…Fyshe," Lowellmina called out, sonorously yet coldly.

Fyshe's heart constricted.

As a vassal, she knew it was a great dishonor to keep silent out of fear of displeasing her superior. She may have been appointed to her position only a few months prior, but she already understood that Lowellmina deserved her honesty.

Fyshe was going to put her foot down—without going back on her warning, no matter what.

Out of nowhere, Lowellmina hugged her, squeezing her tight.

"Ah, uh, Y-Your Highness?" Fyshe stammered, eyes wide in bewilderment. "Wh-what, umm, is the meaning of this…?"

"To tell you the truth, I've always wanted this. To be admonished by a trusted vassal. No one has ever put me in my place."

Oh, how childlike, Fyshe thought when she realized something: The princess *was* a teenager. Her resourcefulness made it easy to forget at times.

But now wasn't the time for this. Fyshe hardened her heart.

"All right, enough dillydallying. We're in a race against time. This must

wait until later."

"Yes, I understand." Lowellmina let go of Fyshe and beamed. "Every word of your warning was true. If we stay any longer, my life will be in danger."

"Then," she started.

"But my life is trivial."

Fyshe went bug-eyed.

Lowellmina continued. "With my path to the throne thwarted, I must prioritize peace in the Empire—as the Imperial Princess and as a patriot."

"And you'll risk your life to see that through?"

"If I know that's for the best."

The two gazed at each other in silence.

Their eyes reflected their determination, their wills clashing against each other.

It went without saying that Fyshe was the one to give up.

"…You're the rightful princess of the Earthworld Empire. You cannot just throw away your life. You must never forget that."

"Thank you, Fyshe."

"There's no need to thank me. I'm your vassal. And it's not as though we've solved our conundrum," Fyshe reasoned.

Even if the princess's will was set in stone, it wouldn't get them past the difficulties standing in their way.

"About that… I intend to visit Prince Wein."

"Can we rely on him?"

"We both wish to preserve the Empire. If I give up on my personal goals and work solely for the sake of the Empire, I'm willing to bet he'll cooperate."

"In theory. But people have emotions. From his point of view, we're sworn enemies who have brought calamity upon Natra. To think he'll readily agree…"

"No need to worry. He's the type of person who can disregard his personal feelings when it benefits him," Lowellmina declared with a wry smile. "Well, if he does refuse, we'll flatter him best we can—though I don't know how far that'll get us."

"If it comes down to that, I shall accompany you." Fyshe gave a low bow in the face of her master's resolve.

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"——And that's where things stand."

Lowellmina took a sip of the black tea that Ninym had brought out as she finished explaining the situation.

"It was my hubris that led me to think I could put one over on you if given the chance. But I've given up on taking this opportunity to rise up in the world. From now on, I'll focus on crushing the rebellion. Join me in devising a strategy?"

"……" Wein sat directly in front of her.

He shot Ninym a look. *Thoughts?*

She doesn't seem to be lying, she replied in silence.

Wein pouted and groaned. "I'm honestly having a hard time believing you."

"What? Doubting a friend? Do you think I'd try and trick you two?"

"I get the feeling you're asking us to cooperate because your dirty ploys didn't work out. Isn't that right?"

"Well, yes, you're not wrong." Lowellmina cocked her head to the side with a blank look. "And what can I do to get you to believe me?"

"I mean, you're the one making the request. Shouldn't *you* come up with something?"

"You're right. Let's see… How about I take off my clothes?"

"I won't stop you if you think trust can be taken as lightly as fabric." Wein shrugged his shoulders. "But you're underestimating me. I'm not so stupid that I'd fall for womanly wiles. Anyone with eyes can see what you're trying to do."

"Fyshe will join me. She's waiting outside."

"Gimme more details…!"

"—Hyah." Ninym's pen stabbed the back of Wein's head. "Wein, we don't have time to play around."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Wein grumbled, rubbing the sore spot. "To confirm, Lowa: Are you willing to do anything to stop the revolt?"

"Of course. I'm no longer in a position that grants me any other choice."

"…All right. Then tell me everything you know about Grinahae and Antgadull."

Lowellmina nodded and divulged as much information as she could. And she knew a ton, seeing as she'd originally planned to have Natra defeat Antgadull for her. She had a deep understanding of their military power and geography.

"At max, they have four thousand men, huh…" Wein parroted. "I know the Gairan State would be able to gather twice as many, but I guess that sounds about right if we're talking about Antgadull. And all their weapons are from the West. That said, they're short on commanders—and their current bunch have low proficiency."

"They also have an insufficient number of horses. If it comes to war, I take it that their main force will be composed of foot soldiers."

"True. If it comes to war," Wein declared.

Lowellmina tilted her head to the side. "You did suppress a feud between tribes without spilling any blood. Could it be that you've actually become a philanthropist?"

"As if. I just didn't want to waste manpower. It would've been a lose-lose to use my troops to battle my own people. As for our current situation, I want to avoid war for one simple reason…because we're broke."

"Okay, but how broke are we talking?"

"Prepare to be amazed. Let's not think about defense for now. With our current budget, we can deploy about five hundred soldiers."

Lowellmina's eyes practically popped out of her head. "…You're joking, right?"

"True story. We haven't recovered from our war with Marden at all. Right, Ninym?"

"If we mobilized any more, we'd risk affecting government affairs."

"And I'm not confident I'll win against four thousand soldiers with five hundred. We might have a shot with Hagal in command, but we've got no time to call him back from his post along the western borders. Which means there's no way for us to challenge Antgadull, at least not head-on," Wein laid out.

Lowellmina reluctantly nodded. "…I see. I understand why you have to avoid war at all costs. But if that's out, how should we resolve this problem?"

"Let's take another look at the issue. Is our goal to take down Grinahae with military force? No. We want a verbal confession about the revolt, putting a stop to this plot at once. In other words, we make Grinahae lose his

mind and surrender without wasting a single cent."

Wein grinned. "Besides, we've been doing the impossible since our school days. Come on. Let's think of a ruse."

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It had been about ten days since Grinahae received the news of his son's death.

Winter was just around the corner. Even those in urban areas far from the mountains had announced sightings of snow.

"Master, the townspeople have submitted petitions asking you to admonish the soldiers for their violent and raucous behavior."

"And those very same soldiers have become disgruntled by how the townspeople are treating them. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before we have deserters…"

"We have correspondence from the State governor and magistrate, master. Please look this over."

The problems in his territory kept cropping up, refusing to come to rest, even if he'd just lost his own son. And in any normal situation, he should have prioritized the reports that rained down on him in rapid-fire succession. But Grinahae couldn't spare the mental energy.

"Shut it! You take care of the small stuff! Natra comes first! How are the investigations on their kingdom coming along?!"

These past ten days, Grinahae hadn't taken any action. Or more precisely, he couldn't. He'd been thinking of invading and capturing Princess Lowellmina. But just as he was about to mobilize his army, he feared the Empire's own soldiers might come. He never issued the order.

Well, there was one thing that he did do: Put the mansion under strict guard. He ordered the townspeople to heighten their surveillance, but there hadn't been enough people to handle the matter. Since Grinahae wasn't on top of things either, nothing changed.

"We haven't received any word of the investigation…"

"You useless fools! Shit! What about the servant who escaped?!"

"They just recovered, and…"

"Fetch them! I'll ask what happened myself!" Grinahae roared at his subordinate, taking his anger out on his underling in a fit of rage.

His dignity had been meager to begin with. By now, it had been all but chucked out the window, offering him respite from the constant fear that danger would find him.

A servant came flying in the room in a fluster. “M-Master! Terrible news!”

“Quit your blustering! What’s going on?!”

“I-I’m sorry. We…we have guests at the front gate.”

“Guests? Idiots! Send them away! I don’t have time to entertain!”

“I understand that you have your hands full, but it’s—”

“_____”

Grinahae scrambled out of the room the moment he heard the name.

He sprinted through the hallway, booked it down the stairs, and skidded to a stop at the front entrance of the building. He saw a few people huddled together.

“——It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Marquis Antgadull.”

And in the center was one boy with a regal countenance that signified noble lineage. His youth and features agreed with the description that Grinahae had heard.

“You’re… You’re here.”

“Indeed.” He turned to Grinahae with a bold smile.

“I am the crown prince of the Kingdom of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest.”

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All right. Time for our main match, Wein thought.

Grinahae gaped at him in surprise, confusion, and fear—a whole assortment of emotions. Wein evenly met his gaze.

How could he break Grinahae’s spirit and spend as little money as possible?

The answer was both simple and obvious. Go crush him himself. That was why Wein had arrived in Antgadull.

But of course, he was shouldering great risk.

“Guards! Attack!” Grinahae shouted, and soldiers quickly rushed to his side with weapons.

Sounds about right.

Grinahae wasn’t just like a moth to a flame. It was a bigger deal than that.

But Wein had already accounted for this. And he had a predecessor who'd marched into enemy territory with a small entourage of her own. Wein had no reason to be worried—

…Crap, I might die.

Or maybe he did, based on the soldiers gathering in droves and looking like they were ready to attack at any moment. This made even Wein take a step back.

"Your Highness." Raklum was among the guards he'd brought along, and his hand grazed his sword.

"Wait. Not yet." Wein held up his own hand to stop them before projecting his voice. "Marquis Antgadull. I'd appreciate it if you called off your guards. I'm not here to fight."

"How dare you tell me that! You killed my son Geralt…!"

"That's why I'm here. There appears to be a huge miscommunication between us. I've come myself to explain and make concessions."

"A miscommunication, you say? And what would that be?!"

Wein made a face laden with an unspoken intent. "If you wish, I'll divulge the details… But is that what you what? For me to tell you here?"

Apprehension flashed across Grinahae. Wein saw right through his reaction.

He's got something in mind. And he isn't surprised that I know about it. Which means he thinks Geralt's death has something to do with the revolt. Great.

Wein decided on his course of action with a speed that Grinahae couldn't even dream of matching.

"Marquis Antgadull, don't you think it would be mutually beneficial for us to sit down and talk? I have a message from Princess Lowellmina for you. And I'd like to hand over your son's remains." Wein pointed outside.

There was a wagon loaded on top with a coffin fit for an aristocrat. Inside was Geralt's corpse.

"And wouldn't you want to avoid bloodshed in front of your son?"

"Ngh, Grr…"

This wasn't to appeal to his emotional side. But by invoking Geralt's name, Wein had given Grinahae a reason to call his guards off—or a way out.

And sure enough, Grinahae nodded begrudgingly. "…Fine. I'll arrange a meeting."

Wein grinned. “Wonderful. I promise it will be productive.”

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“The crown prince of Natra is here?!” Owl instinctively shouted in astonishment at the shocking report.

“There’s no mistake…! He arrived at Antgadull’s mansion just now.”

“…Well, shit! One problem after another!” Owl kicked a nearby chair, sending it flying across the room.

Owl vented about these unwelcome developments as he gathered his thoughts.

“And how large is his party?”

“Just five.”

“……”

How stupid! To think a crown prince would come to a foreign nation with such a lacking entourage!

At the same time, this was how he’d managed to keep this visit on the down low, since he’d done the unimaginable. If he’d dragged along a group of hundreds, they would have detected him before he’d reached the town.

But Owl was sure this ballsy move would cost the prince his life. After all, Grinahae’s pawns weren’t the only ones in town.

“And how many of our men are ready to go?”

“Around ten.”

“Gather everyone. If the prince survives and leaves the mansion, we’ll be there to bring him down.”

“What about our people involved in the other situation? We could call them back.”

“…No need. We’ll work in tandem.”

“Understood!”

As Owl spat his orders at his underlings, he had the keen sense they were falling behind. There was no question that the crown prince of Natra had taken the initiative.

That’s why I’m going to…!

With newfound resolve, Owl began making his preparations.

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“First, I wish to extend my sincerest apologies over the death of Lord Geralt.”

In the room arranged for them, Wein expressed his regrets first as he sat face-to-face with Grinahae.

“You may find this hard to believe, but I did not intend for him to die.”

“There’s no way I could trust you!”

Yeah, I figured. Wein could sympathize with Grinahae’s vitriol. If he hadn’t seen it firsthand, he would have thought it was premediated murder, too. Who would have thought the guy would fling himself out of a window?

“Let’s say I believe you. Why did he die?”

It was the question Wein had been waiting for.

“Because it was the Imperial Princess’s will.”

“What…?!”

“I’ll be frank, Marquis Antgadull… Her Imperial Highness knew everything.”

Those with a lot to hide can’t help feeling antsy when others say that they know everything. This was particularly heightened when they have authority over you, and the look on Grinahae’s face showed that the attack had been effective.

“Knew…what?” His voice trembled as Grinahae did his best to play the innocent.

Wein mercilessly gave chase. “About your involvement in the upcoming revolt, of course.”

“Wh…!”

“A word of advice?” Wein stopped Grinahae, who looked as if he were about to object. “Any chance to weasel your way out of this is long gone. I have proof. Even if I happen to die here, I’m guessing the Imperial forces will come here sooner or later.”

“D-don’t be stupid… I would never…!”

It had to be a bluff. Wein had no evidence. Grinahae could theoretically talk his way out of it.

Go on, take the bait…

Wein knew a bluff wouldn’t be enough to take him down. He was dropping breadcrumbs to lead Grinahae on.

“There’s no way I… That’s it! If you’re telling me the truth, then why are you here? Are you saying you’ve come to deliver Geralt’s body and hand me my death sentence?!”

Hook, line, and sinker.

Wein wouldn't let this moment pass him by. "Would you laugh if I said I've come to save you?"

"Wh…what do you mean?"

"Princess Lowellmina intends to crush your household. As a true patriot, she's merciless to enemies of the Empire. I've cooperated with her plot since we became friends when I was studying in there, but…it seems our goals are slightly different."

There was no way for Grinahae to notice.

He hadn't noticed that he was getting lost in Wein's completely believable account where fiction piled upon fiction. He began to see those fabrications not for what they were but as absolute truth.

"It'd be great for our kingdom if the Gairan State could remain an understanding neighbor. If you're defeated, the land will be confiscated, and the State governor will come to inherit its power. That would be a pain. That man has no respect for royal blood."

"Hmph…"

"I mean, though you've become a vassal of the Empire, you carry the blood of the royal family. A future where nobility are expelled; ensuing days where the masses get their way, ignorant of proper bloodlines. Isn't that a dreadful one?"

Needless to say, Wein didn't actually believe this one bit.

He always thought lineage didn't matter all that much. However, a great deal of people throughout the continent thought it had value, and he knew this belief was especially prevailing among the aristocrats. If that's the case, he had no qualms about exploiting it. Wein was a politician—not a philosopher.

And the topic of lineage lowered Grinahae's guard.

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“That… That’s true. You’re right. But ‘save me’? What do you plan to do…?”

“No need to fear…for the root of all evil, Lord Geralt, is dead after all!”

“Come again…?” Grinahae was dumbfounded.

Wein faced him with a grotesque smile. If anyone else had seen, they would have sworn they were looking into the face of a devil.

“A harrowing tale! Oh, haunting! He forgot his loyalty to the Empire, kept his own parent locked in this house for the sake of his cause, and took advantage of the revolt out of a desire for independence! A beast in human form!”

“…W-wait, you can’t be…”

“But when you consider his reputation in the Empire, many will agree—or even sympathize with you! Princess Lowellmina managed to sniff out his villainous nature, lay down the trap, and slay him! Nothing short of magnificent!”

“Damn you! Pinning everything on Geralt—”

“I mean, of course!” Wein interrupted Grinahae. “Of course, the blame would be put on you! It’s your duty as a parent to atone for your child’s deeds! But the princess vows to resolve the matter by reducing your territory in size—if you bring proof of your participation in this plan and testify that you were unable to stop your son from attempting to enact his scheme…!

“Ngh——” Grinahae trembled, shuddering in response to Wein’s fearsome energy.

“That’s just how it is, Marquis Antgadull. You’re a victim. Bear the dishonor with distinction and beg for the clemency of Princess Lowellmina in Natra.”

Wein was letting his venom sink in bit by bit as he led Grinahae to an escape route. When humans are driven into a corner, they tend to lash out. But if there’s anything that resembles an escape, they tend to make their way out of there.

“Which means Geralt,” Grinahae started in a tight voice, “really was assassinated…”

“It came at the end of a bitter road. But it was a necessary act of justice.”

That was a *huge* lie. He died in an accident. But now that he was gone, Wein would twist everything at his disposal to his advantage, including Geralt’s posthumous reputation and cause of death. The dead can’t talk. They

could only be lauded by the living.

"A necessary…sacrifice…huh…"

"I understand you're mourning the loss of your child. But the survival of your lineage takes precedence. Continue the Antgadull name, and I assure you you'll see the light of day in another life. Come. It's time to make a sensible decision…as your late father would have wished."

"……" Grinahae was silent. His mind must have been racing faster than ever before.

Come on! Come on! Come on! Wein prayed as he waited for Grinahae to come to a decision.

There was a long, long pause before he spoke.

"…I'll prepare for departure. Give me some time."

OH YEEEEEEAH! Wein pumped his fist vigorously in his mind. On the outside, he nodded in satisfaction and held out his hand.

"You've made a fine decision. I'm sure everything will be settled."

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Wein firmly refused Grinahae's offer to have a room prepared for him, leaving the mansion with his guards. His destination was the town inn.

When nobles went out on excursions, it wasn't as if they could leave with nothing but the clothes on their backs. They had to choose guards and attendants to care for them, prepare funds and supplies that would need to be brought for the trip, and carefully select the route to their destination and plan out any rest stops. Only then would they depart.

Grinahae had insisted he needed a few days of preparation.

But Wein shook his head. "Didn't I tell you? The princess is aware of everything."

After all, Grinahae had been on the verge of invading Natra, which meant he had everything in place to leave at a moment's notice. And when Wein made a comment on her omniscience, Grinahae completely retracted his statement, announcing he'd be done the very next day.

Grinahae had a few reasons why he wanted to buy himself time.

One, because he never knew when to give up.

Two, because he needed to mentally prepare for their meeting.

And three—

“Your Highness,” called out Raklum, one of Wein’s guards, suddenly from next to him.

“Yeah, I know.”

The town was filled with an eerie silence even though it was the middle of the day.

They’d heard that the people had locked themselves away as a result of the debauchery of the stationed soldiers. They were disgusted by Grinahae’s hands-off attitude, but—

This is different.

The general atmosphere had changed from when they’d first entered the town. Someone was intentionally driving the people away. Wein had an inherently perceptive eye to see this, as did Raklum with his natural intuition.

“And can we evade it?”

“…No, I sense them behind and in front of us. They’ve boxed us in.”

As he calmly walked along the cobblestone road, Raklum turned to the other guards and gestured his orders. They huddled around Wein.

“I’m guessing they’re positioned along those side streets, too.”

“They’ve covered all their bases.”

These weren’t Grinahae’s subordinates. This plan had worked out a route ahead of time, cleared people out, and staked an ambush. None of his pawns could ever pull that off.

So, who could?

Before they could figure out the answer, human silhouettes appeared from all angles, blocking their advance and retreat, plugging up escape routes.

“We’ll cut through. Don’t lag behind.”

“Got it. Let’s go!”

With his guards, Wein unsheathed his sword and raced toward the attackers.

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There was a chapel near Antgadull’s mansion. Grinahae had it made at the citizens’ request, since he wasn’t deeply religious or anything.

But there he was now. Together with the coffin that held his son’s corpse.

“……”

Geralt looked peaceful in death. Grinahae could tell Natra had been

respectful in the handling of his body. As he gazed upon his son, he looked the part of a parent wandering aimlessly in life upon the loss of his child.

But that was far from the truth. There wasn't an ounce of sadness in his heart.

"…Stupid until the very end," he murmured with disappointment and a self-deprecating chuckle. "No… I shouldn't be surprised. You were my son, after all."

He thought back on his earlier conversation with Wein. It was Grinahae who had been grilled under pressure. He was a marquis of the Empire, and yet he'd been overtaken by the drive of someone twenty-four years his junior.

Oh, it's all coming back to me. The same thing had happened when meeting with his father, King Antgadull.

Just like Father. Or maybe even greater than him…

March into enemy territory. Persuade the enemy with eloquence. Calmly return home. These would seem the actions of a foolish hero, but Wein accomplished them. He had all the markings of greatness. Just like King Antgadull. Hereafter, he would grow into a man of significance and become a driving force in the history of the continent.

Grinahae had always wanted that for himself. He'd wanted to become as great as his father. Even greater.

And yet when up against that young boy, he was faced with the cold, hard truth.

It would never happen. Such a feat was far beyond him.

"Heh—Heh-heh-heh."

What could he call the feeling rising up in his heart?

It wasn't anger. Or resentment. It wasn't beautiful like a flame nor splendid like water. It was clumsy and plain. Like a boulder.

"Now that I think about it, I don't think I praised you even once."

Grinahae and Geralt. Father and son. The child had lost his life, and the parent wasn't far off from sinking into the sea of history.

"I know sobbing for you won't cheer you up."

Obstinance. Yes. That was the name of the feeling.

He was about to place an all-or-nothing bet for the first and last time. This was all he could do as a pebble on the wayside.

"Think of this as an offering. I'll challenge that young hero for you." Grinahae turned on his heel and gave orders to the servants waiting outside.

“Gather up any soldiers who can fight. We’re capturing the crown prince of Natra and then seizing Princess Lowellmina…!”

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The shrill sound of swords clashing against each other resounded in the back alley. Wein and his guards were locked in battle against their assailants.

This is bad… Wein internally clicked his tongue as he assessed the situation.

There were ten attackers, while Wein had five guards. The enemy held the advantage.

But his soldiers were elites, handpicked from Natra’s top troops. They didn’t back down, continuing to hold their ground as they secured the area around Wein.

We’re being lured.

As they were busy staving off their attackers, they were being driven into the alley. He could tell this was intentional.

It won’t be long before the townspeople overhear this scuffle and report it to the authorities or the patrols catch on and come running to the scene. Which means our enemies want a short, decisive battle. And there must be a trap waiting for us at the end of the alleyway.

Where was it? As he backed up against a wall to prevent any attacks from behind, his eyes did a quick sweep across the area. The backstreets were narrow, making a large-scale trap impossible. It had to be a trick that was simple and sudden, one shot to take them down—

“——Oh snap!”

In that moment, the wall that Wein had trusted would protect him was penetrated by a spear from the opposite side—busting right through it to stab at him.

“WHAAAAAAAT?!”

At the very last second, Wein flipped over to dodge the tip of a spear, which grazed and shredded his overcoat.

“Tch!” The assailant who’d bumbled his thrust—Owl—clicked his tongue. He lunged again, but Wein repelled his attack with his sword.

“Your Highness!”

“I’m fine! Focus on the enemy front of you!” he urged Raklum, who’d

grown increasingly panicked.

Wein never once broke his gaze with the man before him.

"Managed to escape, huh. Lucky move."

Wein snorted. "Did that *look* like luck to you? This may be our first time meeting but I think you might need to get your eyes checked."

Hooooooly smokes! I can't do that a second time! No way! No how! Wein thought, forcing himself to keep it together, but his heart was ready to leap out of his chest.

They kicked it into high gear when this guy showed up. There's no doubt he's their emotional anchor. If I take him down, the others will go down with him. But…

He glanced at Owl poised with his spear and knew he'd be a formidable enemy. There were no visible gaps to rush in on. And who knew how long he'd last on defense?

Which means…

Wein smiled brazenly. "You're the guys who got Marquis Antgadull mixed up in the revolt."

"……"

"I should have guessed you wouldn't reply. Then let me take a stab at it. Your real identities? Survivors from the conquered countries in the former alliance—" His voice was piercing. "Officially, anyway. You're actually spies from the West."

Owl thrust his spear. With the flat side of his sword, Wein knocked it off its trajectory in a heavy hit. Pins and needles shot though his hand.

"I'm guessing you're a persistent bunch if you'd go out of your way to recruit a marquis in the boonies. But I gotta tell you. You picked the wrong candidate. A stroke of bad luck. That's why your plans fell through, right?"

"……"

"Your face is telling me you think you've got a chance at fixing things. But do you really? I bet you've got some other pals in town. But they've got their hands full with something else and can't help out. Am I wrong?"

For the first time, trepidation flashed across Owl's face.

"I'll answer for you. Their job is to silence Grinahae for good by assassinating him. Then, they'll erase all proof of the uprising in the mansion. Since the mansion is bustling with activity right now, I'm sure they think they'll have an easy time enacting their little scheme."

This boy…! Owl shuddered internally.

Everything that Wein had guessed was the truth.

The young crown prince had read through his every move while he'd been in Natra.

However, that was the extent of it. It didn't matter if he was an open book. Their men had already infiltrated the mansion. And Wein was being held up here, which meant—

"—Who said these were my only soldiers?"

Owl went bug-eyed in disbelief.

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The mansion of Marquis Antgadull was in a flurry of activity from top to bottom. Soldiers hurried back and forth to carry out their orders, which were occasionally barked out in a raised tone. It was as if a storm was blasting through the mansion, yet a few people stood on the sidelines, watching with no concern at all.

"What's going on?"

"Who knows? I bet the master has come up with another idea."

Chatting over a pleasant conversation were lowly maids. Their duties were related to the upkeep of the mansion, and they had no interest or role in partaking in anything beyond that.

"Anyway, here you go. Make sure that young'un gets their meal."

"Right, right."

With that, a maid headed toward the sickroom with a tray of food to where one of Geralt's servants was resting. They had arrived ten days ago in critical condition.

"But, hmm," she talked to herself as she walked down the hallway. "I saw Master Geralt off before his departure, but I don't think that child was among the servants… I would have remembered seeing someone so cute, after all," she mumbled, heading toward the sickroom.

She suddenly saw a human silhouette down the far end of the hallway.

"Huh? But that's where…"

In the mansion, there were a number of rooms that the servants were never allowed to go near, let alone enter. She'd heard they stored treasures and important documents, but she had no way of knowing the details. The

important thing was that one of those rooms was at the far end of the hall where she had seen the shadowy figure.

She assumed it was a soldier unfamiliar with the layout of the mansion.

Because she was in the middle of delivering a meal, she thought it best to leave it be—but that might sour Master Grinahae's mood. And that meant running the risk that he'd criticize all the servants.

It can't be helped. She trotted down the hallway and peeked around the corner.

"Um, we're not supposed to enter in…" She halted mid-sentence.

When she'd turned the corner, she was confronted by two men dressed as soldiers, and they turned around in shock at her calling.

And she was just as surprised—for one of the soldiers kneeling in front of the door was trying to pick the lock open.

"Um, what are you—aaaaah!" she shrieked as one yanked her arm, forcibly dragging her into the corner.

The tray slipped from her hands and clattered to the floor.

"I told you to keep a close watch…!"

"Sorry. I'll take care of it."

It was here that she finally realized what was and would be happening to her. These two were thieves—and she was now a witness.

She had to call someone. But her decision came much too late. Just then, one man's hand clamped over her mouth as the other gripped a dagger.

Ah, s-stop. She writhed and thrashed around, desperately trying to escape.

But they'd overpowered her, and she was unable to wiggle out of his grasp. The bare blade drew closer, sliding across her neck and—

"…Huh?"

The dagger that used to be in his hand was sticking out of his head.

She didn't understand what was going on. Strangely, the man and girl adopted the same expression before he crumpled on top of her. And while she struggled to process these events, a boy had appeared beside her before she had a chance to notice. She recognized his face. He was the servant who'd come rushing into the mansion a little over a week before.

"The food. You brought it all this way. Sorry about that."

At the same time, she was even more stumped than before. When she'd seen him, he'd had black hair. But the one before her now had hair as white as snow.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be over soon,” he said curtly.

The boy was Nanaki Ralei.

“Protect Grinahae?”

On this day, Wein had called Nanaki to his office to issue an order. The Flahm couldn’t hide his confusion.

“Why do I have to do that?”

“Because I’m almost certain Grinahae will be assassinated,” Wein answered, no bullshit. “The culprits are Western spies who drew him into their plan to revolt. They want to kill him to prevent him from spoiling the scheme any further. I want you to protect Grinahae and make sure he doesn’t die.”

“…What a pain. Who cares if he dies?”

Wein shook his head. “We can’t have that. If he dies now, it’ll be a huge problem. We need him to live, so we can get him to confess.”

Nanaki groaned in dissatisfaction. “But Falanya is my master. I can’t leave her.”

“I understand that. While you’re gone, I intend to up her security.”

“…Why can’t you get anyone else?”

“It has to be you,” Wein asserted. “This job requires a master of disguise. Only one person fits that bill. And that’s you, Nanaki.”

The Flahm are good at makeup. This was an ancient saying in the Western continent that came about due to their characteristic red eyes and white hair.

A persecuted people in the West, the Flahm usually had appearances that were dead giveaways of their racial origin. To circumvent this, it’s said they began trying to deceive others by changing the color of their eyes and hair.

The saying was originally created out of spite to mock them. But this tradition became an essential skill to the Flahm. Parent passed it on to child, who went on to teach it to their own child. Legend has it that the skill passed on through generations is alive and well throughout the continent.

And so, Nanaki made for an excellent choice as a master of this talent.

“…Guess I’ve got no choice. Okay, how should I sneak in?”

“Through the front door,” Wein said as he took out Geralt’s dagger.

“Bring this with you, call yourself Geralt’s servant, and tell them he’s died. Act as weak as possible. They’ll let you rest in the mansion as Grinahae tightens security around him, jumping at shadows. This way, assassins won’t be able to waltz right in.”

“Which means I don’t have to do anything after I get in?”

“Not quite. I plan on arriving shortly after. It’ll probably result in a huge uproar. The assassins will take that opportunity to take out Grinahae and dispose of the evidence. Stop them and secure the proof.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Isn’t it? For you, anyway.”

Without answering, Nanaki took the dagger and put it in his breast pocket.

Before turning on his heel, he asked, “One last thing. Will this help Falanya?”

“Of course. Have I ever lied to you?”

“Yeah, a bunch of times.”

Wein looked away, and Nanaki snorted.

“Well… I guess you’ve never lied when it comes to Falanya.”

Nanaki left the room. His figure melded into his surroundings, and without anyone noticing, he departed for Antgadull’s mansion—

“Wh-who the hell are you?!”

Which brings us back to the present. He confronted the assassins.

“Can’t you tell by looking at me? We’re in the same business.” Nanaki kicked off the ground, aiming for the man.

Even though he hadn’t recovered from the shock, the man tried to reach for the dagger at his waist, but it was too late. Before his hand could reach its hilt, Nanaki closed in soundlessly, snatching it out of his hands and piercing up through the man’s jaw.

“Gah…?!” The man groaned, clawing at his face to yank the dagger sticking out of him, but he lost all strength and slammed into the floor.

“……” Nanaki took a momentary glance at the silent corpse then turned around. “See? Told you it wouldn’t take long… Hey.”

When he called out to the girl, he realized she’d fainted before she was able to pull herself out from under the corpse that pinned her down. Watching

two people get killed right before her eyes had been too traumatic for her.

"…Well, whatever. Saves me time."

Now that he'd stopped the assassins, Nanaki had to get evidence of the rebellion next. That meant hiding the bodies and getting a move on.

"I wonder if Wein is at his wit's end right about now, too," Nanaki murmured as he gathered the unconscious girl to place in a room to rest.

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Just as Nanaki suspected, Wein was reaching the climax of his own scene.

"You're telling me you have men hidden in the mansion—"

"A bit late, but thanks for noticing." Wein faced Owl with a brazen smile that seemed to leer at him. "I have excellent soldiers. I'm hedging my bets that they've stopped the assassination and gathered all the evidence in the mansion right about now. Well, what are you gonna do? Do you have time to dillydally with me?"

"Ngh…!" Owl griped as uncertainty started to bubble in his heart, which he managed to suppress. "If that's the case, I'll just hurry up and kill you so I can rush over there—!"

He roared, letting out a battle cry as he threw all his strength into a single attack.

"Yeah, that's true—I knew you'd try that!"

Wein had anticipated his movements, managing the spear deftly and swinging his blade at Owl's throat.

Owl was not to be underestimated, either. He evaded the perfect counter by a hair and used that opening to follow with an attack, unleashing his strength—when he noticed something.

In Wein's other hand, something was glimmering in the light.

A concealed weapon?! But he's aiming for my shoulder. Even if he managed to strike, it wouldn't be—

—*fatal*, he thought.

That's when a voice shot through him. "Poison."

When he heard that, Owl moved as though possessed, forcefully contorting his body and dodging just as the concealed weapon was about to strike him. If it hadn't been Owl, this would have been impossible. But even for him, it was a miracle that came at the cost of all else.

"—I can't have any assassins getting away."

Without missing his opportunity, Wein sliced off one of Owl's arms.

"GYAAGH——?!"

If it had been anyone else, they would have howled and collapsed to the ground, but Owl rolled away to distance himself from Wein. The wound was obviously severe.

Compressing the hemorrhaging stump with his other hand, Owl shouted in a rasping breath, "Damn royalty, using a concealed weapon…!"

"Call it underhanded, but since I'm the son of the king, that makes it royal decree." Wein flashed an impudent smile.

But there hadn't been any poison in it. That would have made it difficult to wield, and Wein would have been in a tight spot if it was used against him.

"Urg…!"

Owl realized everything had been a setup. By reminding Owl that he'd need to get evidence from the mansion, Wein had created a mental wall that stopped his opponent from doing anything too risky. He mentioned the poison with exquisite timing—and it was toxic to his psyche. One could say Owl was lucky that it had only cost him his arm.

"Captain! —Aaack?!"

As soon as their leader crumbled, the other assailants started to feel the effects. And once that happened, it was impossible for them to recover.

"Well, what now? Do you want to continue?"

Owl gnashed his teeth as if to crush them. "I'll come for your head… Wein Salema Arbalest."

"No need to drop by."

Owl shouted. "…All forces, stand down! Retreat!" he barked.

The attackers drew back like a wave. The guards pursued them for a moment, but Wein held them off.

"Leave them be. There's something more important…"

Upon exiting the backstreets, Wein gazed out toward the mansion. He could sense a cluster of people coming in their direction.

"They're…not…here to help us."

"It's come down to this…"

There were three reasons why Grinahae had wanted to buy time.

There was stubbornness. And the need to psych himself up.

The third reason was to figure out whether he could capture Princess

Lowellmina and if it made sense to break off the deal with Wein.

Because Wein had sensed this ulterior motive, he'd pressed Grinahae to be ready to leave as soon as possible. Since this was the indecisive marquis they were talking about, Wein had figured he'd run out of time before he could come to a decision. However, that assumption had been turned on its head. Wein didn't know the reason, but an invisible hand was steering Grinahae out of Wein's sight.

"Your Highness, what shall we do?"

"Not much else we can do. We'll have to go with Plan B."

"Which means?"

Wein shrugged his shoulders. "Run away with our tails between our legs. We'll steal some horses on the way out and put distance between us."

"Understood!"

Following in Owl's footsteps, Wein scurried from the scene with his soldiers in tow.

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Once he started trying to move things along, Grinahae was struck by the extent of his incompetence.

First, he couldn't gather the soldiers he'd planned to mobilize.

They'd never really had any sort of discipline or rules. When he'd called upon them, most didn't bother responding. And the ones that did show up were unfocused because he didn't have enough commanders. Even as Grinahae raised his voice and warned them to obey him, it was obvious they were patronizing him.

As he was trying his absolute best to whip them into shape, the soldiers sent to capture Wein had sent him a message.

"My lord. We have confirmation that Crown Prince Wein and his guards did not return to the inn."

"On a related matter, we have reports of people matching their physical descriptions stealing horses and leaving town. I assume it was them."

"Ngh…!"

This was a hard blow to Grinahae. His plan had been to throw Natra into chaos by capturing their pillar, Wein. Next, he would have used that opening to invade and capture Princess Lowellmina.

If this had happened before Grinahae got a taste of the real Wein, he would have faked confidence, stating that this was no problem. However, now that he'd witnessed Wein's capability for true greatness, it only confirmed to Grinahae that if the boy led an army, it would be more threatening than he could ever imagine. He mustn't be allowed to escape, no matter what.

Grinahae raised his voice. "Lock down the checkpoints on routes heading to Natra! Foot soldiers, prepare to head out! I will lead the cavalry myself and pursue Wein!"

"Y-you're going to lead the pursuit?"

"Problem?!"

"N-no…"

The subordinate had hesitated to say it, but even Grinahae realized this was an act of desperation. If he left home base to be a captain, it would not only put him in harm's way, but also delay any of his commands and strategies for the greater scheme.

However, Grinahae had decided he would take up the reins as captain and lead the pursuit. In part, there were no other subordinates capable of handling this task, and also he wanted to capture Wein himself, just to prove he could do it.

In any case, he selected fifty of the fastest riders from the four hundred cavalrymen that he'd managed to scrape together and led them out of town.

Their opponents, five in total. Fifty cavalrymen should have been more than enough. The problem was whether they'd be able to catch up. Their targets must have covered considerable distance since their departure. But Grinahae was confident on that point. The checkpoints along the border of Natra were sending smoke signals to notify them of prepared blockades. Of course, there were other ways to circumvent them—but that would eat up time.

And they had a report of a sighting at the second checkpoint. Just as they received the signal to put up a blockade, a couple of riders had tried to push their way through. They were in a gridlock about letting them pass or not. It had taken some time for the riders to force their way through. They'd only just left.

"Chase them with everything we've got! Capture them alive!" Grinahae raced forward on his horse as he issued his manifesto.

Straight along the horizon, their targets came into view.

"There! Over there!"

He figured Wein would prepare soldiers just beyond the border. If their opponents took refuge on the other side, there would be nothing else he could do. But his finest selection of horses could catch up at this distance. And when they did, their numbers would determine the outcome of the battle without question.

We'll make it! We'll definitely make it…!

With his group, Grinahae approached a low hill. Once they crossed, there'd be a basin waiting below them. That was Wein's destination.

Just watch me, Geralt. I'll catch the brat who killed you with my own hands!

As they went up and over the hill in one go, a formation of hundreds of Natra soldiers waited in the basin before them.

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"There's a fifty-fifty chance that negotiations will break Grinahae's spirits," Wein had said at the meeting with Ninym and Lowellmina to discuss their battle strategy.

"Which means we'll have to plan ahead in the event it doesn't work out."

"Obviously. But can we afford to fail in the middle of enemy territory?" Lowellmina asked.

Wein answered. "Let's say we fail. Grinahae isn't the type of person who can do anything to me with a snap judgment. We'll skip town while he's still freaking out."

"Will you be able to escape all the way back to Natra?" This was Ninym's question.

He shook his head. "Doubt it. Which is why we'll send a few soldiers to infiltrate the marquis's territory so that we aren't caught. Based on the speed of the horses, the position of the checkpoints, and the geography…let's gather near this basin."

Wein pointed to a single location on the map spread across the table. Lowellmina had offered the detailed map to aid in Wein's victory, and the geography of enemy territory was now laid bare. It wouldn't be difficult to sneak in the soldiers.

“Once Grinahae knows I’ve booked it out of there, he’s sure to chase me with his soldiers. But if he’s prioritizing speed, he should only be able to take a hundred cavalrymen with him, max.”

“…I see. That’s how you’ll whittle down his army of four thousand to one hundred. That way, even our small group can take them down,” Ninym commented.

“All to make Marquis Grinahae lose his will to fight. He’ll think he only has a few opponents and select only his most elite force, as hundreds of your soldiers will be lying in wait.”

Ninym and Lowellmina nodded in admiration, but Wein wasn’t finished yet.

“Hey, hey, you two. Isn’t it a bit early to be satisfied? That’s not all.”

“‘Not all’?…You don’t just intend to arrest Grinahae afterward?” questioned Ninym.

“Didn’t I tell you? My goal isn’t to take him down: It’s to break his will. If I capture him, he’ll just get more stubborn and refuse to cooperate.”

Wein smiled maliciously.

“I’ve got one more thing in store.”

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“Ri… Ridiculous.” Grinahae couldn’t help but shudder at the scene before his very eyes.

These were the lands of Marquis Antgadull. Why were the soldiers of Natra here?

It was a natural question for Grinahae to ask, but he didn’t have time to seek out an answer.

“Let us retreat, my lord!”

“We should be able to pull back if we make it to the checkpoint!”

His subordinates’ tense voices rose up. Their admonitions were right. The difference between them was as clear as night and day. Natra numbered around four hundred, and their battle formation was beautiful even from an enemy standpoint.

On the other hand, he came in with fifty cavalrymen who were already tired from the journey there. It affirmed that challenging Natra to a battle would be reckless—even if they stayed in this territory.

But Grinahae didn't come to a decision. Or rather, it'd be more precise to say that he couldn't. He knew he couldn't win. But fleeing here essentially meant giving up on capturing Wein. He could almost hear his plans come crashing down, leaving him dumbfounded.

If Natra attacked right then, his team would collapse faster than a castle made from sand.

But that isn't what happened.

What actually occurred was even further from his imagination.

"——Hmm?"

The forewarning was the tremor of feet upon the earth, followed by a heavy, low sound from behind. When his soldiers turned around to see what was going on, a cloud of sand kicked up. Emerging from it were the troops, coming toward them.

"I-incoming! From the rear! Their numbers…are in the thousands!" a subordinate cried out in sorrow.

That was only to be expected. A secret force had manifested from behind them. Enemy forces were lined up at the front. They had blocked off every route of escape.

"Wh-whose flag is this?! Natra's?!"

It didn't matter who they were or how they got there. If it was Natra, the only two options were to admit defeat or die an honorable death. Grinahae was overcome by anxiety—it was as though his entrails had all turned to ice. He waited for the subordinate's reply.

"I-it's…not! It's the Empire!"

"*WHAT?!*"

Was it the foot soldiers that he'd left in town who had followed them? He quickly shook his head. These men had arrived much too fast.

Then who could it be?

He didn't know. But they had to be Imperial troops, which meant they were here to back him up. He was a marquis of the Empire, after all.

"Quick, merge with the army behind us! We'll display our flag and make a full retre—"

"M-my lord! Please wait!" One of his subordinated interrupted him with a trembling voice and pointed at the center of the approaching army. "Look, those…those flags!"

Grinahae looked ahead and saw three flags raised.

One was for the Empire.

Another for the Gairan State.

And then, the last flag that billowed in the middle—

"The flag of Imperial Princess Lowellmina…?!"

Lowellmina. The one he'd been after. She was now leading her troops and drawing ever closer.

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"Sheesh, I will not allow for this nonsense again."

Many of the soldiers who made up their forces were from the Gairan State. In the center was an old man on horseback who spoke candidly, surrounded by elite soldiers who guarded him closely. He was the governor of the Gairan State.

"I understand. I'm eternally grateful," responded the girl on horseback next to him, Lowellmina. "I will be certain to convey your thoughtfulness to my brothers."

"And include Your Highness's tomboyish ways."

As his advice went in one ear and out the other, an envoy approached on horseback.

"I have a report. We've confirmed sightings of troops for both Natra and Grinahae in the basin."

"I see. Well then, please invite the crown prince and the marquis over our way," the governor responded.

"Understood!"

Watching him from the side as he issued orders, Lowellmina quietly murmured, "Well then, let us bring things to an end."

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Is this reality? Am I dreaming? Grinahae had started to mull over these extremes. This was his current mental state.

He was currently walking past State soldiers setting up camp. With Natra in front and the State in the back, there had been nowhere to escape. He'd been summoned by Princess Lowellmina, which he was unable to refuse. As they escorted him to her, his gait took on the heavy steps of a criminal about

to face his execution. He began to think he'd rather walk down that road forever, but his prayers went unanswered. He arrived in front of a large tent.

"I've brought Marquis Antgadull."

"Come in."

At this beckoning, he entered the tent, where three people waited for him: Wein, Lowellmina, and the governor of the State.

"I, Antgadull, am at your service…" He took a knee before Lowellmina.

As he looked at the ground, in his mind, his future flashed before his eyes. There were many paths it could take. And most ended in his death.

What do I do? What in the world do I do…? His mind was spinning.

Wasn't there some way out? Something. Anything—

It was then that he caught sight of Wein looking directly at him.

"Well then, let us get started—" Lowellmina began.

"Your Imperial Highness!" Grinahae cut her off forcefully. "Before that, please answer me just one question!"

"Marquis Antgadull! Know your place!" the governor reprimanded.

"I don't mind… What is your question for me?"

Grinahae took a deep breath and looked at Wein. "Why is the crown prince of Natra here…?!"

He stubbornly pressed on. "This is Imperial land! And yet the crown prince of Natra is present with his armed forces! Doesn't this display intent to invade?!"

He planned to verbally attack Wein. That was the means of escape that Grinahae had spotted. If Wein lost a legitimate reason to be here, Grinahae thought the prince would no longer be in a position to judge him.

Of course, if everyone here was conspiring together, it wouldn't matter if it was legit or not—although he'd somehow managed to zero in on a sore spot, for Wein and Lowellmina were scheming together, but the governor was not.

"Of all the things to say."

But of course, the pair weren't the type to be negligent in laying groundwork for the governor.

"I'd been wondering why you would bring these soldiers and fail to send correspondence. Did you come here without knowing anything, Marquis Antgadull?" the governor asked.

"Wh-what do you mean…?"

The governor sighed, giving him a once-over with exasperation. “It’s obvious why His Royal Highness is here. Natra will be joining the Empire for a military exercise, after all.”

“——What?”

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“I suppose they’ll be starting the exercise right around now,” Imperial Ambassador Teord Talum murmured in contemplation in the palace in Natra.

“If it’s going according to plan, the forces of Natra, Antgadull, and the State should be gathered together by this point,” Ninym responded. “We cannot thank you enough for your support.”

“Think nothing of it. It would be a great loss for Princess Lowellmina and Prince Wein’s meeting to come to nothing because of Lord Geralt’s accident.”

Talum had traveled across many of the provinces during his career as a diplomat. And during his time, he’d made the acquaintance of the governor of the Gairan State. Armed with this information, Wein had selected him as the middleman for negotiations with the governor and formed a plan to hold a joint military exercise. Because of this, Natra had been granted legal right to enter Imperial land. It was in no way grounds for censure.

And the pretext for this was to attend to Lowellmina’s selfish desires. In the public, she was known as a tomboy who’d invited herself to Natra, pining for Wein and even going so far as to follow him onto the battlefield. Which is why her insistence on coming all this way to see Wein in command didn’t seem particularly unnatural.

“About the gold mine in our earlier discussion…”

“Not to worry, Ambassador Talum. The crown prince is a person of action, not words. Your cooperation will be rewarded.”

They’d used the gold as a bargaining chip to rouse Talum. They’d planned for the Empire to take management of the mine sooner or later. It wasn’t exactly a tearful good-bye.

“I see. Well, in that case, all that’s left is to wait for his safe return.”

“You’re right,” Ninym agreed with a light smile.

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“A…military…exercise…”

What are they going on about? thought Grinahae.

He hadn’t heard anything about that. But one look at the governor, and he knew he hadn’t told him a lie.

“Of all the ridiculous…”

It wasn’t something that could be achieved in a day or two. One would have to think ahead and prepare.

In other words, Wein had everything planned out by the time he’d arrived at the mansion.

Persuade Grinahae. Or fail and flee to attack Grinahae with the armies of Natra and the State. It was well scripted. Wein had even thought to use military exercises as a pretext.

“Could…this…actually…happen…?”

He considered retaliating. That alone was not a complete impossibility. However, everything was in the palm of someone else’s hand. A boy over two decades younger than him had seen right past his thoughts and actions.

———*No matter what I do, I’ll never win.* And when he accepted this, all strength left his body.

Just as he was about to collapse, Wein grabbed onto him, darting to his side.

“…You look unwell, Marquis Antgadull.” Lowellmina’s voice was clear and beautiful yet cold as a guillotine. “My apologies, Governor. Could you prepare the military exercise with only the forces of Natra and the State?”

“With no soldiers and their commander in this condition, I suppose.” The governor nodded and left the tent.

As soon as he disappeared, Lowellmina spoke up. “Well, what do you intend to do now?”

“…What do I intend to do?”

“I don’t particularly care either way.”

Even Grinahae could infer that Lowellmina was telling him to choose if he wanted to live or die. She was asking him—the one who’d tossed out a deal like scrap paper, going back on his word to attempt to capture Wein.

She was extending him the last bit of compassion.

“I—I…”

I wanted to be a great man.

But he knew this was impossible.

Then, at the very least, he wanted to sully the history of heroes. But if even that was too much for him.

What was left?

“I ask for your benevolence, Your Imperial Highness—”

The only thing Grinahae could do was bow his head.

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Epilogue

With the short autumn season at its end, the Kingdom of Natra was in the dead of winter.

Ninym looked out the window in the hallway, able to make out the mountain range in the distance buried under the snow. In time, even the flatter lands of the urban areas farther away from the mountains would be blanketed under its whiteness.

In fact, her breath was already white as it fogged up the windowpane. She was about to wipe it away with her fingers when someone called out to her.

"Oh, it's the aide," said one of the officials, sauntering toward her from the other side of the hallway.

Ninym turned her gaze away from the window.

"Perfect timing. Our emergency supplies for the winter were just delivered. And here are the reports."

"Ah. Thank you." She took the reports from the official and scanned them. "…I see. With the visit from the envoys, I was worried how things would turn out when we had to delay our preparations. But this will be just fine."

"Agreed. We should be able to make it through winter… I guess our only regret is about how the potential marriage between the Imperial Princess and His Highness panned out." The official sighed. "To think an emergency in the Empire would cause them to shelve it."

Though a series of unexpected incidents had cropped up, the envoys managed to make a safe trip back to the Empire. Around the same time, news of a revolt in the making had spread across the Empire, triggering turmoil in each territory under its rule. The chaos was ongoing, making it an unsuitable

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time for the Imperial Princess to talk about marriage. All discussion was to be suspended until the affairs of state were in order. And many subjects in Natra found this terribly disappointing.

"…Absolutely," Ninym replied mildly, but her mind replayed the events that had happened before then.

"Farewell—for the time being."

Going back to the time before the delegation made their journey home.

Ninym and Lowellmina were sitting across from each other, circling a small table. Wein was absent at this private tea party for the two of them.

"I was saved by you and Wein, through all the complications. Thank you."

"No need. I did what I had to do."

"As coolheaded as ever. But that's just another reason why I like you, Ninym."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks," Ninym responded curtly. "By the way, Lowa, is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That you've put the discussion about marriage on hold."

"Oh." Lowellmina understood. "Well, to expand my influence within the Empire, it's more beneficial for me to remain single than marry foreign royalty. Plus, if I say it's suspended because of the impending revolt, no one will find it suspicious," she reasoned with no trouble at all.

"Herm…" Ninym groaned back. "But you like Wein, right?"

The cup in Lowellmina's hand tumbled onto the desk with a loud clang.

"……" Lowa picked it up as if nothing had happened. "W-well, sure. As a friend."

"I mean, as a woman."

"……" The hand trembled slightly, clutching the teacup. "Wh-whaaaaaaaat? Oh, come on! Why would I? Why do *I* have to like that weirdo? Who did you hear that from?!"

"All right, put the cup down. Your clothes will get dirty," Ninym suggested.

Lowellmina obliged. After a long silence between them, she asked

timidly, terrified of the answer. “S…Since when?”

“Since we were in school.”

“WAS I AN OPEN BOOK?!”

“Pretty much.”

“……” Lowellmina buried her face in her hands and looked down. Her ears were bright red.

To get her envoys and lead them to Natra, Lowellmina had a few supposed grounds for her visit.

In the public eye, she was a member of the delegation. Behind closed doors, she was here to discuss marriage. Beyond that façade, she’d come to solicit Wein’s help to become Empress. And that was a bluff to save the Empire from distress by making herself bait.

But in the end, that wasn’t the truth. In her heart of hearts, she’d wanted to be an envoy to learn more about Natra, thought that it might be nice if she could marry Wein, and wanted his help in becoming Empress. Which meant every last reason for her visit turned out to be her true intentions all along.

Well, not that we realized until much later, Ninym admitted.

Lowellmina’s face finally regained its composure. “…I admit it. I do feel that way. But I don’t mind this outcome.”

“As the Imperial Princess?”

“That’s a part of it. Hmm, how should I phrase this…? I like Wein, but I like you just as much.”

Ninym blinked at this unexpected response. “…Well, I don’t feel the same way.”

“That’s not what I meant… Ah, right. Call it admiration. I’ve always admired the relationship between the two of you.”

One was royalty; the other, a member of an oppressed people. By all rights, the two should have been incompatible, but they knew they could always count on each other. For Lowellmina, who’d known their true identities back in their school days, it was a sight both odd and precious.

“There were so many times I wanted to be a part of your little circle. For it to be the three of us, not two. But with this series of events, I’ve come to the realization that I’m not good enough to join your ranks just yet. That’s why I’m fine with the way things turned out.”

This was Lowellmina’s heart laid bare. Because she treasured them so greatly, she felt like she wasn’t worthy.

“Ninym, I will reign as Empress. Without question. And when I’ve become your equal, I intend to join you two as your third,” she declared between the two of them.

It was no jest. Lowellmina was showing her truest feelings.

Ninym gave a small nod and smiled. “In that case, there’s not much else to say. As your friend, I cheer you on.”

“And that’s all I ask.”

After that, they chatted for as long as time allowed—certain they would meet again.

“…Um? Is something the matter?” The official was calling to her.

Ninym pulled out of her thoughts, returning to herself with a start.

“Apologies. It seems I’m still a bit drowsy. Thank you for the reports. I’ll bring these to His Highness.”

“Please.”

Ninym headed to the office as the official saw her off.

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Upon returning to the capital, the first thing Lowellmina did was make the necessary arrangements for the vassals. She’d obtained evidence of plans for the revolt, plus witnesses. But if she just revealed this information to the public, it would likely invite the ire of those with plans to participate.

That was why she was going to contact trusted vassals, confide in them, and weaken those participating in the rebellion.

She had to hurry—but she couldn’t rush. This was the balance that she had to strike. Lowellmina steadily found allies among the vassals.

“Making good progress, Princess Lowellmina,” Fyshe commented, pleased.

Lowellmina answered with a nod. “But this intel will leak out bit by bit. It won’t be long before chaos engulfs the entire Empire. We have to be prepared before that happens.”

“Understood,” Fyshe replied, obediently.

Looking at her, Lowellmina pondered. As Fyshe had noted, things were

going well. But it wasn't by her power alone. She looked back on the moment when she parted with Wein.

"Wein, I imagine you had other strategies that were less complicated. Isn't that true?"

Their plan had been a success—to break Grinahae's will and force him to swear allegiance to Lowellmina. But now that it is was all over, Lowellmina didn't believe that had been his only scheme.

"Like, what if…I'd sent Grinahae to spy on the revolt, and Geralt was murdered by a conspirator as a result? Then you could have persuaded Grinahae without tarnishing his child's legacy. Or you could have abducted Grinahae to interrogate him."

Wein answered her questions with ease. "I considered something along those lines, but I knew it would be easier to control him if we broke his spirit. Right, Lowa?"

An unexpected answer.

Grinahae was loyal to Lowellmina now. He wasn't likely to show any antagonism toward her for the time being. Even though it benefited Lowellmina, Wein had nothing to gain from it. She looked at Wein as she thought through this, and he cracked a tiny smile.

"I made a promise back then. 'If I can't escape, I'll probably end up lending a hand or two.'"

"Oh…" A shiver ran up her spine.

"Well, that's about as far as I go. Do your best from here on out, Miss Future Empress."

"…Of course."

She hadn't been the only one who had remembered and treasured that trivial conversation—the one that she held so dear.

And more than anything else, that made Lowellmina happy.

I vow to see things through to the end.

Her friend had laid out this much for her. To properly respond—that was the true meaning of friendship.

...Besides, one more thing concerns me about that day.

When Lowellmina had been troubled, Wein had told her that the real enemy was the cultural ideologies of the people. Looking back on it, she had a feeling that it hadn't been an off-the-cuff remark. It had to be something he'd been thinking about for some time.

And when she'd requested his cooperation, Wein had refused, citing that there were things he had to do. In terms of cultural ideas that he would potentially take a stand against, she could only think of one thing.

The discrimination against the Flahm…

This was nothing more than conjecture. She'd tried to sound out Ninym at their farewell tea party, but Ninym didn't give off any hints that she knew what Wein was up to.

But it was certainly possible for Wein to do something about it.

He would put together a plan to slaughter the fearsome beast lurking on the continent—all for one girl. All so she could live her life undeterred by anyone.

Let's say that's true. If I get wrapped up in this somehow…

…She would oppose that beast alongside him. Just as he had done for her.

In order to do that, she first had to concentrate on the fight before her.

"Fyshe, what's next on my schedule?"

"You have a meeting with the minister in the afternoon—"

It had been half a year since the Emperor of Earthworld passed away from illness.

Princess Lowellmina had spread the word of the plans for an uprising against the Empire.

When the factions had discovered that she had successfully laid the groundwork to prevent it—and the three princes had fallen into its trap, too preoccupied with their own little dispute to notice—they were swamped with tension and political purging. As a result, their factions became less unified as some left to join Lowellmina.

Lowellmina Earthworld became the head of her own faction and made her debut in Imperial politics, taking center stage.

◆◇◆

"Ugh… I'm pooped." Wein huffed out a long sigh as he released all strength,

propped up by his office desk. “I can’t believe this all started with a potential marriage proposal and ended with a trip to the Gairan State…”

“Lowa had you at her mercy,” Ninym commented with a wry smile.

If there was a winner in all this chaos, it was Lowellmina—without a doubt. The road had been a long one, but she had achieved exactly what she set out to do.

“Well, it’s not so bad. Everything worked out in the end.”

“You say that, but I was working for free! All those hours, unpaid! The Empire might be covering the cost of the military exercises, but hosting their envoys? We’ve gotta be in the RED! RED! *RED!*”

“But Nanaki stole important documents from the Antgadull mansion—in addition to the other evidence. We’ll be able to use those to leverage a deal with the marquis to sell us mirror-dyed textiles wholesale.”

“And? We’ll break even at best! Besides, Lowa’s camp has taken over Antgadull’s territory, which means trading with them will only make it look like we’re siding with her faction…”

“You say, as though it’s not already far too late.”

“It’s not! We’re neutral! No relation to Empire infighting!” Wein’s stubbornness took the reins on this one.

Ninym spoke with nonchalance. “What if you married Lowellmina and dove into their politics headfirst? If you win the factional war, I bet you’ll be able to live the slow, easy life of your dreams.”

“Lowa already called the marriage off.”

“That’s what she wants. What about you?”

Wein shrugged. “Think about it. We have no idea how good her odds are of winning this thing. But let’s say she does. Do you honestly think she’ll let me retire?”

“Yeah…no.”

“Right? There’s no question I’d get wrapped up in one problem after another. I’d end up busier than ever before! I’m gonna do everything I can to avoid that.”

“…It’ll be a struggle to stand on equal footing with him, Lowa,” Ninym muttered, letting out a quiet sigh.

Next to her, Wein started up again. “At any rate, we’ll steer back to where things were, now that the delegation is gone. And keep an eye out for any changes in the Empire, too, of course.”

“Agreed. In that case…” Ninym deposited a mountain of papers in front of Wein with a thud.

“…What’s this?”

“Documents awaiting your approval—piling up ever since your trip to the Gairan State.”

“……”

“And petitions from each department put on hold during the delegation’s stay. And I’ve booked your next two weeks to meet with prominent figures. We have plenty ahead of us.”

“……”

“Oh, and because your marriage with Lowa fell through, I’m sure there will be aristocrats getting all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, pushing their daughters on you to take as your consorts. If you don’t want to be married, I advise doing your best to avoid them.” Ninym grinned. “Well, let’s get to work as usual.”

“I JUST WANNA SELL THIS COUNTRY OFF AND GET THE HELL OUTTA HEEEEEERE!”

His lamenting whines echoed far and wide—on and on and on.

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Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. This is Toru Toba.

Thank you for picking up the second volume of *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)*. The theme of this book was—you guessed it—political marriage. I'm pretty sure some readers read this section first, so I'll spare you any spoilers. I hope you enjoy Wein agonizing over and conquering political marriage—which is an unavoidable obstacle among royalty and nobility.

Anyway, I'm writing this in the smack-dab middle of summer. This year had been sweltering beyond words…

If you catch some speed on a bike, you can normally feel a coolish breeze even in the dead of summer. But this year, it feels like you've put the hairdryer on full blast…

This volume is set in the fall, and I pray every day for the weather to be more tolerable in real life, too.

Well then, time for some words of gratitude.

To my illustrator, Falmaro. Thank you for your beautiful illustrations in this volume.

The girls are adorable, which is a given, and Wein's colorful expressions made me burst out in laughter. It may be more fitting to call him the Prince of

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Funny Faces instead of the Genius Prince…

And to my head editor, Ohara. I've caused you a bunch of trouble again. Thank you for letting me revise the manuscript until the very last minute. I was able to polish this book to my heart's content.

And thank you to all my readers. It's thanks to you that I was able to receive good feedback. Writing can be a lonely profession, and there are times when I get nervous about whether I'm going down the right path. But your reviews get me through those tough times. I hope you'll continue to root for me.

I will be coming out with a third volume for this series. I think I'd like the next story to take place in the West. Look forward to the continued adventures of Wein and his friends.

Well then, until we meet again in the next volume.

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Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
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Chapter 1: Hey, How About a Political Marriage?
Chapter 2: A Visit from the Imperial Princess
Chapter 3: A Fated Meeting, A Predestined Reunion
Chapter 4: Circling Schemes
Chapter 5: A Clash of Opinion
Chapter 6: Double Ingenuity
Epilogue
Afterword
Yen Newsletter

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